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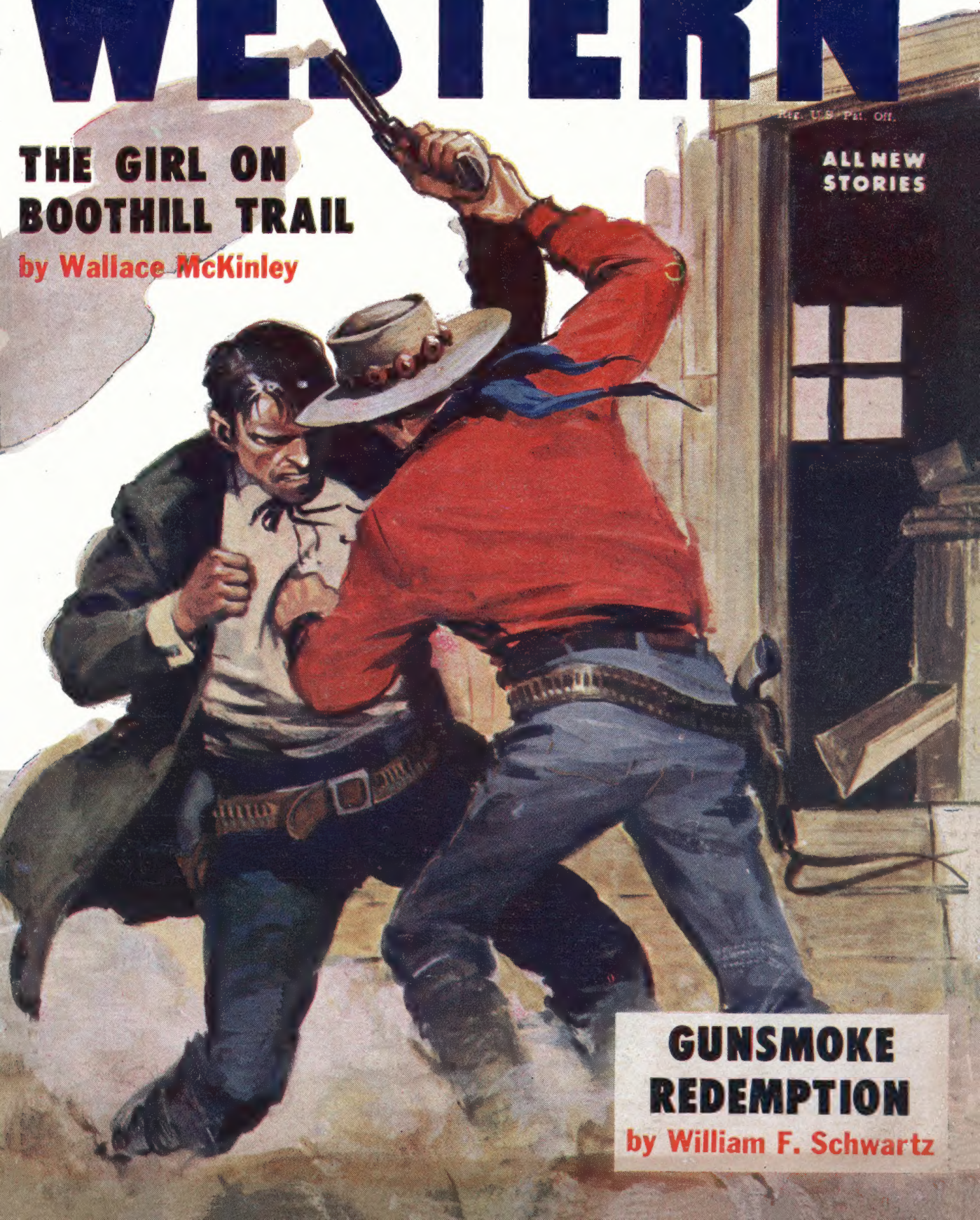

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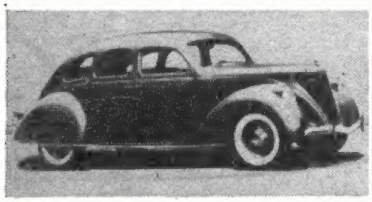

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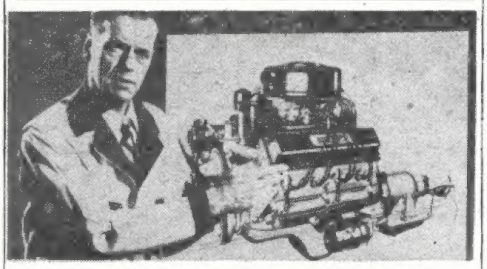

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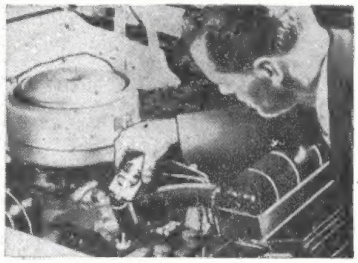

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Volume 24 February, 1957 Number 3

Featured Novel

THE GIRL ON BOOTHILL TRAIL

by Wallace McKinley 6

The killing of Guy Malone was rather neatly done, and Pello and Renny had fair enough reason to think they were going to get away with it. But that was before Ezra Baxter and Joan Davenport showed up, but fated to be brought together in the maze of danger and sudden death!

Short Stories and Features

TEXANA (Special Feature) ..... **Harold Gluck** 41
There never was such a country — but there might have been ... IF!

ALFALFA DAN (Verse) ..... **Edward Garner** 49
Who would have thought the bandits' plan would be upset by a chawin' man?

BETTER THAN NATURAL ..... **Kenneth Ganz** 50
John Ladd learned the special duty of the badge-packer ...

PHANTOM HOOVES ..... **Peter Norcross** 61
Harry Doyle had schemed too well; now he had to give himself away!

LET'S STEAL A COW (Special Feature) ..... **Lee Thomas** 72
The rustler isn't a thing of the past; he still operates today!

GUNSMOKE REDEMPTION ..... **William F. Schwartz** 76
Juan Murphy had been an underdog; now he was back. Wearing guns!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* WILL LUTON, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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Ezra Baxter showed up at Leroy's Corner too late to save his friend, Guy Malone — but in time to upset a pair of murderers' plans. But he wasn't alone on the deadly trail to justice — there was a girl also looking for Mike Renny, and Baxter wondered why. Could it be that Joan Davenport was Renny's sweetheart?

THE GIRL ON BOOTHILL TRAIL

by WALLACE McKINLEY

A HALF-BREED trapper named Willie Feather spent a winter high on the slopes of Mount Robson; when spring came he went down to his base camp at the river, loaded his canoe with supplies, and paddled downstream across the border to Leroy's Corner, in the State of Saskatchewan.

But he brought no furs.

He brought money, and a lot more of it than he'd possessed six months earlier. More than he'd ever had before. Not gold, either; genuine folding money in dollar and ten-dollar bills. A thing like that was bound to be noticed in a place like Leroy's Corner.

It was noticed by Mike Renny, whose face cracked in a grin at this luck. He was still grinning when he strolled into the police office, helped himself to a chair, and squinted his colorless eyes at Sergeant Pello, who sat with his big booted feet propped on an untidy desk.

"What's so funny?" Pello wanted to know.

"The way things happen," Mike Renny said. "Bill, this's our lucky day. Willie Feather is in town an' spendin' money like it grew on trees."

"His money grows on animals," the sergeant said. "I guess he had a good season, huh?"

"You're wrong. He didn't bring no furs. Just the money, but lots of it. Wonder where he got it."

Pello was a big man with little hair on his skull and less patience in his heart. "You didn't come here to wonder, I reckon. Get to the point, huh?"

"You ain't very bright today, Bill," Mike said. "We need a...a scapegoat, don't we? Willie Feather'll do jus' fine. Don't you see. Guy Malone's body might be found, and Guy's got a lotta friends around here. You never know what they'll dig up."

"Malone's been dead for five weeks," Pello growled. "The wolves have likely scattered his bones by now."

"You never can tell, Bill. We fixed him late in the afternoon, an' there was a heavy fall of snow at dusk. Malone's

body might've covered an' preserved. It was high up on Robson, too. But now the snows are runnin' away an' the wolves have gone north. The body might come to light an' be found."

"So what?" The sergeant was frowning. "So some one finds him. How the hell can we be connected with it?"

"Malone's friends ain't ours, Bill. An' we was outta town, you and me, at the time Malone should've reached here but didn't. There's fellas in this town who ain't gonna forget that. If they find out for sure that Malone's been killed, they're gonna get nasty. You never know what they might dig up."

"I reckon you're crazy, worryin' over nothin'," Pello said. "An' I still don't see where Willie Feather comes into it."

"I'll explain, kinda slow, so's mebbe you can savvy. As a trooper, you're supposed to do somethin' about Malone's disappearance. This's your chance. Where'd the breed get all that money? Guy Malone was a gambler an' always carried a lotta money. Guy's five weeks overdue...an' now this trapper hits town loaded with dollars. See what I mean?"

Sergeant Pello thought about it for long moments. Then he said, "I see what you mean. You wanta have this thing cleaned up, finished with forever, huh? Then folk'll forget about it an' we'll be safe. But...I don't know."

"Hell's bells!" Mike spat across the room. "Why not?"

"Might be dangerous. Willie Feather might have some legitimate reason for bein' loaded with cash. We might stir up a hornet's nest for nothin'—"

"Are you crazy? What legitimate reason could that breed have for bein' rich? He's been up on the Robson all winter, ain't he? He's supposed to have been trappin'. Where would he get money, up in them fir forests? O' course he stole the stuff, there ain't no doubt about it. Likely he killed some lone traveller for his roll. What's it matter if we hang him for the wrong crime?"

"All right, all right," Pello rumbled. He was heavy, deep-voiced and looked strong and tough. It was curious that the weedy Mike Renny could always bully him into half-hearted agreement.

PELLO BUCKLED a gunbelt round his waist and strode from the office. The town was crowded. An untidy line of canoes along the riverbank told of trappers arriving from fur-grounds to the north and west. The warm whisper of spring brought life to Leroy's Corner, as it did everywhere.

Sergent Pello looked in at each of the three saloons and found Willie Feather in the third. It was a wide room with low beams, from which hung smoking lamps, the approach of sunset outside making such lightning necessary to combat the smoke-hazed gloom. There was a bar, behind which fat Roy Tollice served fiery whisky, and tables at which fur-capped, check-shirted men played poker or caressed the tight-frocked saloon girls on their laps.

Willie Feather was playing poker. Pello strolled across the room, returning the nods of some men and the cold stares of others. He stood behind the breed's chair and watched. The breed had matched a pile of chips in the centre and wanted to see cards. The cards he saw were too good. He tossed in his hand and laughed.

"I think mebbee the luck she is leave Willie Feather, eh?" he said in his soft hiss. "I ween tomorrow, mebbe."

He left the game. Pello ordered a drink at the bar, following the breed there. The little trapper called for whisky, paying for it from a roll the size of his fist. He toted no gun. Half-breeds were never too popular, and seldom invited trouble by carrying guns.

But Sergeant Pello was a cautious man, and he eased the .45 in its holster before approaching Willie. He knew that the breed would have a knife, that

he would use it like a flash of light if he was cornered with a guilty conscience.

"Had a good season, huh?" he said quietly, easing alongside Willie Feather and calling for whisky. The trapper looked at him with frozen eyes that were neither friendly nor hostile.

"Ver' good, Sergean', ver' good. All the trapper catch plenty fur, you bet, make plenty monee."

Fat Roy Tollice slid whisky to the sergeant with a smile. Tollice was a good businessman in a tiny town where competition was great, and smiled at all his customers whether he liked them or not. Bill Pello sipped his drink and grinned heavily at Willie Feather.

"You're a sneakin' liar, Willie. You made a lotta money, sure, but not outa furs. You brought no furs into town. All you brought was money, huh?"

While he spoke the big trooper was tensed for action. But the action didn't come. A few men had gathered around interestedly, and that was what Pello wanted. The little breed looked at him with frozen brown eyes, then calmly lifted his drink to his lips.

Pello's left hand moved quickly, chopping Feather's wrist aside to send the glass and whisky spattering along the bar. Poker games stopped and more men gathered around.

"Where'd you get all that money?" Pello cried loudly. "You brought no furs down-river, yet you're loaded with dollars. How come? Answer me, you shifty-eyed muskrat!"

The breed's face was expressionless. He seemed in no hurry to answer. One of the men nearby said, "What're you gettin' at, Bill? What's it all about?"

Pello sneered at the man, whose name was Jim August, and who was no friend of the sergeant's. Pello said, "Some folks around here have got bad memory, huh? It ain't but five weeks since Guy Malone disappeared. We know that he was headed across Mount Robson from Mackenzie Creek. This breed does his trappin' on the Robson, don't he? An' here he is, lousy with money, spendin' it like water. Guy Malone always carried a roll, didn't he! Can you fellas add it up, or do I have to say it over again nice an' slow?"

THERE WAS an interested murmur among the men. The breed looked at Pello, and now there was fear in his eyes.

"No, no... Willie Feather not keel Meester Malone. I get the so much monee honest, like always. Willie Feather he iss hones' trapper, yes; He sell the plenty fur, he make the plenty —monee"—

Pello sprawled the breed with a backhanded slap across the head. From the floor. Feather looked up at him, tears of rage in his eyes.

"I keep tellin' you you never brought no furs down-river, you sneakin' breed. Where'd you get the money?"

"I sell the plenty fur up-river. Agent man he wait at camp an' when Willie Feather mush the fur down mountain, thees man he buy 'em all queeck!"

He got to his feet, dusting himself down, and glaring his hate at the police trooper. There was a buzz of talk among the crowd.

"That the best story you can dream up? The agents all wait here for the furs to come in. Why would one of 'em go up-river to meet you when he's only gotta wait here?"

"Thees agent man he not from the Corner—he from some other place—far 'way—" The breed shrugged.

"What place?" Pello asked, his fleshy lips curled in a sneer.

"I—I not know, Sergean'. Some place —" He waved a hand vaguely northward. "Willie Feather not remember. Thees man he pay the monee, Willie Feather hand over the plenty fur." He shrugged again, in a way that said he didn't care a damn where the agent had come from as long as he got the money.

Any doubts that had lurked in Bill

Pello's mind were gone now. If that was the best story the breed could give, then it would be safe enough to blame him for Guy Malone's death. He said, "I'm taking you along for questionin' Feather. I figure it's Malone's money you're throwin' around, an' that you killed him for it. I'm gonna try an' get it outa you—where you met him, where you left the body. A citizen's disappeared an' I aim to get at the bottom of it. You comin' quiet, or do I have to drag you?"

The breed knew when the odds were against him, looking at the ring of faces and saying with the inevitable shrug, "I got nothin' to fear, Sagean'. Willie Feather not keel nobody, I go with you."

The crowd fell back as the two men marched out of the saloon. Pello had the trapper by the arm and they went toward the police office, leaving Roy Tollice's customers buzzing with excited talk. Mike Renny was still in the office, and greeted Pello with a squinting grin.

"Well!" he said, slumped crookedly in the chair. "What's this, Sergeant, a lawbreaker? What's Willie Feather done?"

Mike was enjoying himself. Feather began to say something, as if ready to pour out his troubles, but he caught the mockery in Renny's eyes and knew that he was a doomed man.

"No!" he hissed, breaking away from Pello and backing to a wall, his dark little eyes alive with panic. "No—please—you not keel Willie Feather! I not do nothin', nothin' at all. I—"

"No, we won't kill you," Bill Pello said. "We just wanta know where you got that money, huh? Mebbe you better start talkin'."

The breed licked his lips but said nothing. Mike Renny said, "What the hell, Bill. We know where he got the money—"

"No, we don't," Pello grinned at Mike. "Not really, we don't. An' I figure we might as well know, huh? There might be more where it came from—an' money's somethin' I can always use."

He stepped close to Feather. The breed made a swift movement with his right hand and a steel blade flashed in the light.

"Look out!" Mike yelled, startled out of his chair.

But Pello was ready; the knife swished through air as he shot his left foot forward to kick the breed in the stomach. The breed folded, coughing on the floor, his knife clattering across the room. Pello kicked him again, and Feather was smashed flat. He was spitting blood and groaning.

"Start talkin'," Pello said. "Where'd you get that money?"

"I tell you!" Feather cried. "I tell you how the agent man he wait at camp, pay me plenty monee"—

Pello leaned down and grabbed him by the throat, hauling him to his feet, forcing him backward over a table.

"Talk, damn you!" His face was close to Feather's, sweating with effort and anger and a few other things harder to name. "Come on... where'd you get that money?"

"The...the agent man...like I say..." Feather's words died to a gurgle and, in baffled fury, Pello took one hand from his throat, jerked out his forty-five, and clubbed the barrel across the breed's face. Willie Feather went limp. Pello let him go and he rolled off the table, crashing to the floor and lying still.

"You're a fool, Bill," Mike Renny said. "Unconscious men don't talk. You're too damned impatient, that's the trouble. Against Willie you've gotta use science. You've gotta make him suffer without passin' out, see. Leave it to me. Give me a hand to rope him to a chair, an' when he comes to I'll show you a few Injun tricks—"

THERE WAS a sudden scuffle and the breed was running for the door. He'd been foxing. Pello roared in rage

and fired a shot. The bullet smashed at the slamming door and the two men heard the thud of running feet outside.

"Damn him!" Pello cried, and rushed to a window.

The dusk was deep now, but the sky showed light beyond the curve of the trail that swung west from Lerov's Corner. Against that skyline, Willie Feather's running figure showed. Sergeant Pello didn't have much time, and the range was long, but he was a good shot.

The bullet cut down the breed in his stride. Pello put another shot into the vague shape on the ground. The noise of the shooting brought people running. Men burst in at the police office door, among them were friends of the sergeant.

Pello was unruffled. He drawled, "Too bad...but the law allows me to shoot an escapin' murderer, an' that's what Willie Feather was!"

Jim August was one of the men. He said, "So *you* say, Pello. How do we know it's the truth?"

"I was kinda expectin' that question. You're one guy in this town who don't ever cooperate with the law, August."

"Not when you represent it," August said calmly.

"I guess you've got your reasons, an' I sure hope to catch on to 'em some day. Right now I've gotta be satisfied with disprovin' your damned insinuations. The truth is, Feather killed Guy Malone an' stole his money. I beat the truth outa him. He spilled it all—where the killin' took place, where the body's hid—everythin'. Then he panicked an' threw a knife, an' made a break for it. There's the knife over there!" He pointed to where it lay on the floor.

"You ain't proved nothin'."

"I've got a witness to it all," Pello sneered. "Mike Renny, here. And tomorrow I'm takin' five or six volunteers on a hike up the Robson to where the body is hid. We'll bring back what's left of Malone...then mebbe you'll be satisfied, August, huh?"

Next day the expedition to Mount Robson started out. Jim August offered to go, making some crack about wanting to cooperate with the law for once, but Pello would have none of him. Then Pello saw the unbelieving glint in August's eyes.

"All right," he said at last. "Come along, August. I'm gonna enjoy seein' you eat humble pie. You think I lied about Feather's confession, huh? I'll show you."

That the expedition hadn't much trouble in finding Guy Malone's body goes without saying. Pello himself had helped carry it off a mountain trail after Mike Renny had killed Malone, and his memory was good. Pretending to follow Willie Feather's story, Pello climaxed the search with just the right mixture of relief and triumph. And when the posse got back to Leroy's Corner, it seemed that the mystery of Malone's disappearance was solved forever.

- 2 -

THE STRANGER was lean-hipped and wide shouldered, seeming to fill the doorway as he paused at the entrance to the *Log Cabin Saloon*. It was night and the saloon was taking its usual toll of citizens' pockets. But men paused in the drinking and gambling to glance at the stranger towering a good head over most of them, as he sauntered to the bar.

The stranger didn't seem to mind the curious glances. He wore the clothes of a man from the cattle country, black shirt and narrow black trousers, high-heeled cowboy boots which had been expensive a long time ago but were well worn now, and a black floppy hat stained with sweat and trail dust. About his lean waist a gunbelt hung low to one side, holstering a Frontier

model Colt with a silver-worked butt.

All this was taken in by the citizens who somehow quite naturally made way for him at the bar. His brown face broke into a smile and there was smiling friendliness in his voice as he spoke.

"Thanks, folks...a right hospitable town, this Leroy's Corner, huh? Never been here before...me, who's been most everywhere. Name o' Ez Baxter, folks. All o'you who wanta be friends, line up along the bar. The drinks are on me."

There was no lack of friends for Baxter or at any rate no lack of men willing to drink his liquor. They crowded along the bar. Tollice called to half-breed employees to help serve the drinks. The stranger watched with soft amusement, like a man who admired to see folks enjoy themselves.

Jim August, thick of body, with yellow hair and friendly blue eyes, was among the drinkers. He lifted his glass and grinned.

"To Ed Baxter," he said. "Welcome to Leroy's Corner."

There was a general murmur of assent and much solemn drinking.

A small group remained with Baxter. August was one of them. He called for more drinks, and grinned at the stranger.

"On behalf o' Leroy's Corner I'll return the compliment. I'm Jim August, I've got a tradin' post down-river at Kuska. So you're from Arizona, huh, Baxter? You've drifted quite a ways."

"Don't say that," Baxter grinned. "Fact is, I came to this town to gamble."

The tall stranger swallowed his whisky and grinned at the doubt in the eyes of August and the two or three men nearby. Then he said, "It's a game o' poker that was arranged a long time ago. Between me an' another guy who likes to gamble. Baxter, he says, I'm flat broke right now, but I've always wanted to stack chips with you, an' by golly I'm goin' to. When, I says. I'm goin' north to Leroy's Corner for the winter, he says, an' if you feel lucky I'll meet you there next spring. It's a deal, I says, I've never seen Saskatchewan nohow. An' here I am.

A man at August's elbow mouthed the obvious question.

"Who is he, this hombre you're gonna play cards with?"

"Who's the doggoned most reckless gambler in this town?" Baxter asked. "Wouldn't he be a fella named Guy Malone? If he ain't the dangest card-player here, he sure must be losin' his touch. Every other place where he ever stayed..." Then Baxter saw the clouded faces of the men about him, and the grin left his lips. "Hey, what's the matter with you fellas? Somethin' wrong?"

Jim August drained his glass. He said, "Everything's wrong. You won't be playin' poker with Malone, Baxter. He's played his last game...unless he can rustle up a game over the Divide."

THERE WAS silence then, until Ez Baxter thumped a big fist on the bar.

"Dead?" His lips were a straight line.

"Dead. Cashed in six weeks ago. A breed trapper they called Willie Feather killed him on Mount Robson. Killed him for his money."

"That so?" Baxter looked like a man who would never smile again. He said, "And this Willie Feather. Where do I find him? Or has he been 'tended to?"

"He's been 'tended to; Sergeant Pello shot him." Jim August was looking at the grim stranger and reading his face. "Seems like Guy Malone must've been more to you than jus' a gamblin' opponent, huh?"

"Yeh." The tall man's eyes were gazing back into the past. "Him an' me, we kinda had big gamblin' reputations, from Texas to Wyoming and North to Dakota. But we never got to play each other, somehow."

"Fact is, only time I ever got to meet him was last year, in the middle o' Blue Smoke River. It's a long story, fellas. But I was in trouble, half-unconcious and in danger o' drownin'. The river was runnin' high and fast. Then a great grinnin' hombre comes from nowhere an' dives in an' hauls me out. On the bank we get talkin' and soon we find out that we're a couple o' card flippers who've been jus' yearnin' to meet each other.

"Anyway, Malone was broke at the time, so we made this date at Leroy's Corner for the spring, like I told you. He was one hell of a man, that Malone. Flat broke but lookin' forward to bein' a millionaire tomorrow. How'd he make out?"

"He sure did all right," August said. "Was only here a year, but made a pile o' dough outa lumber-jacking across the border in Columbia. Made a lotta friends, too, here in town. Did some gamblin', but not a lot. Said he was buildin' up a bank to try for big jackpots later."

"What was he doin' on that Mount somethin' or other" Baxter asked.

"He'd been workin' at a lumber camp on the Kullen River an' was headin' back to the Corner across Mount Robson. He wrote that he was comin', and we was expectin' him. He never turned up...."

August told the whole story. Ez Baxter soon sensed that the police sergeant, the man who'd shot Willie Feather, wasn't liked by August. But at the moment, that didn't interest him. He was full of sorrow for the man who had saved his life, and disappointed that he could do nothing to avenge him.

After more drinks, August said, "Does this alter your plans any? Will you mosey along outa this riverside hole now, or stay awhile?"

Baxter thought of the big southern cowtowns where gambling stakes were attractive, and there was only one answer. He began to say, "Guess there's nothin' for me here—"

But, looking at Jim August, his attention was caught by a flash of color beyond. He focused his gaze to the green-frocked slenderness of a girl who'd just entered the saloon. She stood a pace inside the door, looking about helplessly, and it was clear that she felt very out-of-place yet was there for a purpose. She was tall and full-breasted, and graceful from the shine of her bright brown hair to neat ankles.

"Excuse me for a moment," Baxter murmured. He went to the young woman's side, dusty hat in hand. He bowed.

"Could I mebbe help you, ma'm?" he asked politely.

HIS GLANCE flicked over the exciting swell of her figure and the cold, serene beauty of her face. For a moment Baxter thought she was going to ignore him. Then she turned her fine head to look up at him with a kind of reluctant approval.

"Thank you. I'm looking for somebody...Mr. Renny. Mike Renny. Do you know him?"

"I'm a stranger in this town, ma'm. Ez Baxter, at your service. But if you'll wait outside, I'll find your Mike Renny if he's here an' send him out to you—"

She left. A lot of gazes followed her out. Baxter sensed that the girl was somehow out of her element, not only in the saloon, but in Leroy's Corner. He was keenly interested in her. She was about the most beautiful woman he'd seen, and he'd seen a lot.

He went back to Jim August at the bar. "Who is she, August?"

"Joan Davenport," August was grinning at something in the tall man's eyes and voice. "Daughter of ol' Ken Davenport, who runs the town newspaper. She's only been here a week. Lives in the East, jus' visitin' her Dad, and not the most sociable gal in the world. Likely she figures she's a cut above us backwoods folk."

"She's lookin' for some one named Mike Renny. D'you know him? Is he in here?"

"Mike Renny?" August looked more than astonished. He looked unbelieving. "What...what the devil would she want Renny for? That no-good loafer—"

"Is he in here? Baxter persisted. "I said I'd find out."

"Haven't seen him around," August scanned the faces along the bar and at the poker tables, and said, "No... Renny ain't here."

The girl was waiting impatiently. Baxter said, "I'm sorry, but Renny isn't there. Could I help you look for him, Miss Davenport? I mean, he could be in some other saloon and—"

"Oh, dear!" It was an exclamation of impatience. "I want him right away. He generally goes to the *Log Cabin,* I'm told. Are you sure he isn't in there?"

"I'm sure. But look, there's another saloon across the way, let's try there."

"I really shouldn't trouble you—"

"No trouble at all," Baxter said. "After all, you're new to these parts, an' the saloons aren't the kind of places you—"

"For a stranger, you seem to know a lot about me," she said, as they crossed the street together. "You know my name, you know I'm new to the wilderness..."

"I never stay a stranger for very long. I kinda like to get known quickly an' make friends an' find out what's goin' on. Look, if you don't mind me askin', what on earth d'you want with a no-good loafer like Renny?"

The question angered her. They were on the wooden verandah of another saloon now, and Joan Davenport stopped, looking up at him in the gloom.

"You're not a stranger! Or you wouldn't know what kind of person Renny is. I suppose you think you're very funny...I shan't trouble you any more. Goodnight!"

She swung away and into the saloon, the doors swinging in place to swallow her. Baxter grinned, leaned against a post and waited. He didn't want to annoy the girl, and at the same time he didn't want to leave.

HE WENT into the saloon and stood with the swingdoors nudging his back. Joan Davenport was in the middle of the room, looking about with a kind of frowning distate. It was a bigger saloon than the *Log Cabin,* and low-roofed, the atmosphere gloomy with cigarette smoke. Men lined the bar and crowded the gaming tables. Leering glances passed over the girl in green.

She took short steps about, scanning faces. Ez Baxter figured to let her suffer awhile, then to go to her rescue again. But a bearded giant sitting at a table with a glass of liquor in his right hand, reached out and caught the girl's wrist in his left.

She didn't panic or struggle. She just froze. Her haughty eyes swept over the big man and words came contemptously from her lips. The big man didn't like the words.

He wore trapper's clothes, the fur cap still snuggling his head. He growled, "Ain't good enough for you, huh? Come here, filly, an' we'll see if I can thaw out that ice on yur face..."

He jerked the girl close so that she fell across his lap. She struggled then. She knocked the glass of whisky from his hand and he laughed. "Wildcat, huh; I like wildcats..." He tried to kiss her.

She fought him, frantically, avoiding his questing lips. Her kicking legs squirmed her sideways off his lap and he struggled to get a fresh grip of her. His big hand ripped the dress and bared her white shoulder. Then Baxter took a hand, stepping close to cuff the bearded face with stinging open hand.

"What the hell!" the big trapper roared. The girl fell to the floor, a tumbled riot of brown hair and ripped clothing. Then the trapper got to his feet, kicking his chair away to face Baxter.

"What the hell!" he roared again.

"Keep calm, fella," Baxter said easily. "You made a mistake, that's all. She ain't that kinda gal."

"Who says so? I'll kill you. I'm King Farley...an nobody puts his dirty paws on me an' lives."

Joan Davenport ran from the saloon, holding her torn dress about herself. Baxter saw men gathering to form a ring, excitement in their faces. He felt a thrill of excitement himself, too, but hid it behind an easy smile at Farley.

The big trapper came at him. Baxter hit him on the bearded face. It had no effect. Farley got his arms around Baxter and instinct warned Baxter not to let him get his hands locked. Quickly he thrust his head forward and upward, cracking Farley under the chin. The trapper's head snapped back and Baxter broke free of him.

The giant came ahead, shaking his head and snarling. Baxter fended him off with clever fists, then rammed body blows at a waistline that was like a tight-packed bag of wheat. But Farley still advanced, like a great stubborn bear. He closed in, got an arm about Baxter's neck, and hauled on the headlock to bend his face and body forward. Then his right knee smashed upward at Baxter's face and dazed him. He saw the big knee coming up again—and he stamped savagely at Farley's left foot.

His head came free of the headlock as the jabbing knee hit him. Blood warmed Baxter's lips as he straightened to meet the roaring rush of the giant. He swung a tight fist which crashed on Farley's jaw. It was a tremendous blow. The crowd yelled as Farley's legs folded and he sprawled.

But only for a moment. King Farley opened his eyes and rolled a little. Baxter was about to dive on him again when blood pooled from under the big man and the crowd murmured with surprise. Ez Baxter hesitated, staring at the blood. There seemed to be a lot of it.

Then he saw the pain in Farley's eyes. But the big trapper spat savagly ad said, "We'll finish this some other time, stranger. Right now—right now I'd be kinda obliged if somebody'd take that knife outa my back—"

HE ROLLED, coming to rest face downward on the floor. Baxter bent over him. There was a slight lump under the man's buffalo skin belt, and Ez Baxter jerked the heavy check shirt away and saw a knife embedded in flesh. The watchers crowded round. One man growled, "I didn't see you use no knife, stranger—"

"Danged half-breed trick!" another cried. "Stranger, we oughta—"

"Shut up!" Farley twisted his head to say. "He didn't use no knife—it's one I had hid under my shirt. I—I kinda fell on it. Hell's bells! Will somebody take it out!"

"No," Baxter said quickly. "There's a lotta blood, but the knife's a kinda plug an' if we pull it out there'll be more. Someone hustle an' get a doctor —this could be dangerous."

A man ran from the saloon. King Farley lay on his stomach, his big head resting on his arms. "Now I'm sober! Damn you, stranger! A man spends a winter in the woods, looks forward to gettin' drunk, then some interfering stranger horns in an twenty dollars worth o' liquor is wasted. I oughta—"

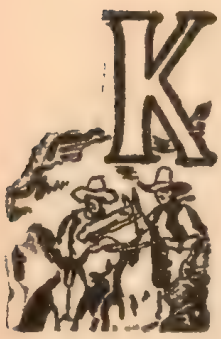
"Don't talk, big fella. You're only makin' this wound bleed more." He grinned, feeling a sudden warmth toward the dangerous man he'd been fighting a few moments earlier. He said, "It was kinda careless to fight with that thing under your shirt."

A doctor came and took over. Later, Farley was carried from the saloon. Somebody gave Baxter a drink. He went outside and looked about, but of course Joan Davenport was gone. He went back to the small hotel where he'd booked in earlier, and went to bed.

Next day he went to see the growling King Farley, who was being kept

in bed at the doctor's house. He was surprised to hear that the damaging knife was one that Farley had found, high on the slopes of Mount Robson, four weeks earlier.

- 3 -



KING FARLEY frowned at his visitor. "What was we fitin' about? I can't remember—I was half drunk—"

"Sure you was," Ez Baxter said. "Three-quarters, mebbe. You was annoyin' the wrong kinda gal, an' I chipped in. Forget it, huh? I wanta hear more 'bout that knife."

"Like what? Farley's small eyes slinted from their surrounding whiskers.

"Like where exactly did you find it. A friend o' mine named Guy Malone was killed high on Mount Robson, an' it seems you found the knife soon afterwards. Mebbe it don't mean a thing — or mebbe it does."

"Mebbe it does," Farley nodded. "So Guy Malone's dead, huh? I didn't know. Only hit town las' night an' all I thought about was gettin' drunk. Used to play cards with Malone sometimes. Most always he won. So—so they found him out, huh?"

"Found him out?" Baxter frowned. "Who found what out?"

"Somebody—I dunno. They found out his secret, I mean. Malone was flat broke when he drifted into the Corner, see, but soon he had money again. Where d'you think he got it?"

"From workin' in lumber camps. "A guy named August told me."

"Jim August don't know it all," Farley said. "It's only by a kinda accident that I know it myself. Malone asked me not to tell nobody, an' I never did. Sure, Baxter, he got some of his money from lumberjackin' at first—but he got most of it from gold."

"Gold?" Baxter showed his surprise. "You mean he...he made a strike somewhere? I didn't know Guy was a prospector."

"He wasn't, Baxter. But one day, early las' autumn, I'm layin' traps along the lower north-west slopes of Mount Robson an' who do I run into but Malone. He's got a camp on slopin' land near a waterfall an' is diggin' for gold. An' findin' it.

"I ask him how come, an' he tells me the story. Seems he was headin' for a lumber camp in Columbia when he comes across an old-timer named Kortell. This Kortell is lyin' in a gorge with a broken leg an' ain't had nothin' to eat or drink for two days an' nights.

"Malone does his best, fixin' the broken leg in rough splints an' givin' Kortell food an' coffee. But the old-timer never rallied. Three days later he calls to Malone an' tells him he's gonna kick off. He says he's a prospector an' he's found a freak cache of gold, an' on account of Malone's been so good to him he wants him to have what gold is left in the diggings. He direc's Malone how to get there, but Malone figures he's mebbe off his head an' only dreamin' about the gold.

"But after Kortell dies, Malone gets to thinkin' that it won't do no harm to check up. It takes him a few days to find the camp, which Kortell had left to shoot game for food. An' sure enough there's gold. Like Kortell claimed, it was only one o' them freak lodes they sometimes find in mountain country, an' Kortell had dug most of it. Malone got the rest. Not wantin' to start a rush or have his claim jumped while he was away, he kept it a secret."

"I don't see how he could," Baxter said. "He'd bring the gold into town, wouldn't he?"

"Yeh...but not to this town. Not to the Corner. He took it to a town in

Columbia an' turned it into cash. A little place called Pine Falls, a few miles inside the Columbia border. He'd already made a trip when I met up with him. He was still diggin' the yeller stuff an' figured to make another trip to Pine Falls. Then he was gonna head back to the Corner an' have a high ol' time at the poker tables.

"Anyways," King Farley concluded, "I sure kept his secret, like he knew I would. We was friends, Malone an' me. He knew I was kinda wild an' rough but when I gave my word I kept it. Now you tell me he was killed, huh? Too bad. Looks like somebody else got on to the secret an' killed him for his roll. I reckon he must've had a few thousan' dollars on him."

"Let's see that knife," Baxter suggested. "does it kinda tell us anything?"

FARLEY pointed to his bundled clothes beside the bed and Baxter found the knife. It was short but broad-bladed, the handle bound with deerskin. "It ain't a skinnin' knife, see. No air-grooves 'long the blade like a skinnin' knife. It's strictly for fightin' ...or mebbe throwin'."

Ez Baxter examined the knife, as if he expected it to tell him something. But it didn't. He'd seen plenty of knives like it. "Ain't no way o' tellin' who owned this danged thing. But how was it when you found it? I mean... did it look like it had been used in a killing?"

"How d'you know when a knife's been used in a killing?" Farley growled. "There wasn't no blood on it, if that's what you mean. It was just lyin' there on a mountain trail. No sheath ..that was the only queer thing, I reckon. Them knives are most always carried in tight sheaths an' they don't slip out."

"Mebbe it was used in a scuffle an' some got left there. Reckon I'll go an' ask Jim August some questions 'bout Malone's death. See you later, big fella."

But he soon found that August had gone down-river to his trading post and wouldn't be back for ten days. Baxter chafed at the delay. The feeling was growing in him that all was not what it seemed regarding the death of Malone. He had a bad hunch about it. He was playing with the idea of heading for Kuska to talk with August when he noticed a small wooden building with Police spelled in official red letters on the frame window.

Acting on impulse, he went in. A big man of soft and bulky build, almost bald of head, sat with his feet propped comfortably on a table. He wore a sixgun slung low, and a mean look which seemed to indicate no scrupples about using it.

"Sergeant Pello? Howdy. I'm Ez Baxter, from points south."

"Howdy," Pello said, eyeing him curiously. "What can I do for you, Baxter?"

"I'm kinda wonderin' 'bout a friend o' mine." Baxter eased himself on to a chair and pushing his hat back on his scalp. "Fella named Guy Malone. I came here to meet him, but they tell me he's dead.

"Dead as a tin o' beef," the sergeant said. "Too bad, huh?"

"Sure is, Sergeant. They tell me a trapper killed him."

Yeh. Little breed they called Willie Feather. He drifted in with a roll 'o money an' no furs. I got kinda curious. Beat it outa him that he'd killed Malone an' taken his money. Then he tried to get away an' I shot him. We brought the body in later, a few 'o the boys an' me."

"Queer." Baxter murmured. Danged queer!"

"What's queer about it? Them breeds would kill their own mothers for a dollar bill."

Baxter shrugged, feeling again the

instinctive hunch that things weren't what they seemed. He said "It's kinda queer, too, that he should confess, even if you did beat him up. Seems to me a beating for a killing is a good bargain. Seems to me most breeds would've took a beating an' stayed silent. What 'bout that?"

Pello swung his big feet from the table and sat up straight, his gaze a nasty mixture of anger and impatience. "Look, are you makin' out that, for some ornery reason I'm lying?"

Ez Baxter didn't like Pello. It hadn't taken him long to decide that a policeman who openly admitted to "beating it outa" his prisoners, couldn' be much good. "I ain't sayin' anythin' like that, Sergeant. I'm just kinda curious, that's all. Malone saved my life once, an' there's things about his death that puzzle me. For instance, how was he killed? Was he shot?"

"Stabbed. The silent way." He got up, went to a shelf, took a knife from it and tossed it in front of Baxter. "Willie Feather was kinda knife happy. Likely that's the knife he used on Malone. Feather threw it at me when he tried to escape."

BAXTER looked at the knife. It was similar to the one Farley had shown him, but bound with greenhide. Thoughts buzzed in Baxter's head, cold thoughts edged with anger that had to be fought down before he dared speak again.

Then he handed the knife to Pello. "Wal...I reckon the case's closed, like you said. But I had to make sure. So long." He sauntered from the office, sensing Pello's scowling gaze on him.

For the rest of the day the problem nagged Baxter. Next morning it was still with him. But later in the day he forgot it for awhile as he paused to watch a slim woman crossing the street.

"Good afternoon, Miss Davenport," he said.

For a moment, he thought that she was going to ignore him. But she seemed to think better of it, pausing to look at him unsmilingly and say, "Good afternoon, Mr.....Mr. Baxter, isn't it? I think I owe you some thanks for last night. I hope you weren't hurt—"

"Please forget it. The big trapper was drunk, or he wouldn't have annoyed you. We're friends, now. He's really a nice fella—"

"He's a beast! An uncouth beast... like most of the men in this terrible hole—"

She broke off, turned and walked on. Baxter went after her. He suited his pace to hers and said, "You mustn't be too hard on Leroy's Corner folk. Some of 'em are a little rough, mebbe, but if you understand 'em..." He shrugged, and changed the subject. "Did you find the man you were lookin' for las' night? Mike Renny, I think his name was."

"I did, thank you..."

Her voice was as cold as ever but there was secret depths in it. Baxter looked at her, watching her face as she stared straight ahead. With a directness that was typical of him, he said, "You're in trouble, I think, Miss Davenport. I'd sure admire to help you if you'll let me."

She looked at him with surprise. "Really...I'm not in need of any help, I assure you! Soon I'll be headed back East, away from this terrible place. Goodbye, Mr. Baxter!" She swung into a building and, rather pointedly, slammed the door behind her.

HE SPENT the evening in the *Log Cabin,* having nothing better to do. The place was crowded, as usual. Fat Roy Tollice greeted Baxter by name, perhaps hoping for another orgy of drink-buying. When Baxter bought only a single drink, however, Tollice said, "Mebbe you're aimin' to woo that filly tonight, huh?"

With thoughts of Joan Davenport on his mind, to Ez Baxter it seemed an amazing question. But his thundering brow relaxed as the barkeep went on with, "Lady Luck, I mean...the filly you claimed you'd go to hell for."

With a slow shake of his head, Baxter said, "No. I've got things on my mind. I never gamble while I've got problems worryin' me."

"I see." Tollice looked at him keenly. "You're still worried 'bout the killin' of Guy Malone, mebbe. Are you interested?"

"Kinda," the fat man said. "I'm one o' them neutral hombres who most always keeps things to myself. I mean ....I hear things, an' if they ain't none o' my business I forget 'em pronto. But there are exceptions....if you know what I mean."

"I don't, but I'm interested. Pour yourself a drink at my expense, an' keep talkin'."

"All right." Tollice didn't speak again until he'd tasted the whisky. Then, "Kinda surprisin', the way everybody took Sergeant Pello's word that Willie Feather had killed Malone. Ain't usual...most everybody's got him figured for a shady hombre...."

The barkeep was leaning heavily across the bar and talking in low tones, so that even a group of drinkers ten feet away were out of earshot. He went on, "But me, I been watching men across bars for thirty years, and I reckon what I don't savvy 'bout human nature ain't worth knowin'. So when I tell you that I don't like Bill Pello, you can take it for what it's worth. Add to the fact that Bill an' his sly friend Mike Renny were outa town at the time o' the killin'...also, that Willie Feather had a damned legitimate reason for bein' loaded with cash."

Baxter was watching the fat man closely, trying to decide whether he was genuine, or just working off a hate. "Are you suggestin' that Pello an' Renny did the killing?"

- 4 -

MEN WERE calling for drinks along the bar, and Ez Baxter had to wait for long impatient minutes. At last Roy Tollice waddled back and answered the question.

"I ain't suggestin' things, I'm just givin' you some facts, an' you can take 'em or leave 'em. I was right close by, listenin', when Pello came in here an' questioned Willie Feather 'bout all the money he was throwin' around. An' Feather told him he sold his furs outa town, that an agent for somebody up north had been waitin' at the breed's river camp an' had bought the furs when he arrived with 'em."

"That sounds like a tall story."

"Sure does. It did to Bill Pello...or so he said. An' at the time it seemed a tall story to me. Now I ain't so sure. In the last week there've been three more trappers hit the town loaded with cash but without any furs. They all claim that their season's catch was bought by an agent who went to meet 'em. D'you reckon they all had a hand in the killin' of Malone?"

Baxter drained his glass, frowning. "I don't know what to think. I ain't real familiar with this trappin' business, but I sure never heard o' agents goin' out to meet the trappers. I kinda thought they waited in town an' bid for the catches when they come in."

"It's a changin' world," Tollice shrugged. "Mebbe there's been a rise in fur prices or somethin'...mebbe there's more competition than there's ever been before. All I'm interested in, Baxter, is that Willie Feather's reason for havin' money weren't no stranger than the reasons given by other trappers since. There's a kinda bad smell 'bout

that Malone killin', an' it seems to me that folks are too willin' to forget 'bout it." He wiped the bar with a cloth, moving away. "Me. . . I'm still neutral. Like I said, I've given you facts an' you can take 'em or leave 'em. . ."

Baxter was inclined to take 'em. Tollice's information was startling, and it tallied with the business of the two knives shown him by King Farley and Sergeant Pello. He gave the whole matter plenty of thought, and slept on it. Next morning he decided to go to Kuska and see Jim August.

By mid-morning his horse was saddled and his packs loaded. He rode out of town and headed east along the river. Inquiry had fixed Kuska as being only three days' ride away, a tiny trading post which could not be missed by anyone following the course of the river.

He reached Kuska at noon on the third day, skirting the river round a massive outcrop of stone to see the tiny group of buildings with canoes banked nearby, and the brown figures of Indians and half-breeds lounging in the sun. It was a peaceful scene.

JIM AUGUST was out on the verandah of his store to greet the visitor. "Glad to see you, Baxter. Heard there was some one headed this way. . . these Injuns o' mine seem to know every movement for miles along the river." He crinkled his broad face in a smile. "What's the matter? You get tired o' the Corner?"

Without waiting for an answer he turned to the grinning redskin and snapped an order in Iriquois. Baxter's packs were unloaded and carried into the house, then his horse was led away. Together in a room behind the well-stocked store, the two white men ate. And Baxter got down to business.

"Likely I won't stay long. I just wanta talk with you, 'bout Guy Malone's death. I've learned a few things that're mighty interestin', an' I've got some suspicions I'd like to test on you."

"Go ahead," August said, stifling his surprise. He hadn't doubted the Willie Feather version of Malone's death, not since the finding of the body at any rate.

But now, as he listened to Baxter's story of what Roy Tollice had told him, his blue eyes went hard. "Damn me for a fool. . . . I felt a kinda natural suspicion of Pello when Feather was shot, but I let myself be fooled into belief when Pello guided us to the body. He sure did put on a good act.

"But why? I can imagine that Pello pullin' any kinda dirty stunt, but he'd have to have a reason."

"Gold's a danged good reason," Baxter went on to tell Farley's story of the dying Kortell and his gold-find. Later, he said, "If some one found out about that diggings they might kill Malone. Mebbe they didn't know that he'd jus' about emptied the lode, an' killed him for it. Or mebbe they did know, an' killed him for the roll o' money he'd turned the gold into."

"Either way, it's still a theory. An' I guess you ain't the kind to act until you're sure. How're you gonna go about gettin' the proof you need?"

"I don't know." Baxter frowned.

He stayed at Kuska for just two days, during which time he did a lot of talking with his host. Some of it was about the Davenports. Ez Baxter hadn't been able to get the girl out of his mind, and now he asked questions in an effort to fathom her troubles. Jim August seemed to know a good deal, and spilled it willingly.

KEL DAVENPORT, he said, he had only been in the backwoods country for a few years. He had come from Boston, where he'd been editor of an important newspaper.

"But I was fairly friendly with Kel, and he talks a lot, 'specially if he's had a few drinks. Seems it's the old story o' husband-and-wife splittin' up. She left him years ago, takin' the daughter with her. It broke Kel. He

started to slide, lost his job with the paper. Later, he wandered north-west an' got jobs with small newspapers in small towns.

"But it seems he never held a job for long. Finally he drifted into Leroy's Corner. He was near broke. But he had a freak run o' luck at faro, an' started a newspaper with the winnings. That was mebbe four years ago. The paper struggles along, kinda, but I guess it keeps him in liquor-money."

"And the girl?"

"You've got me, there," August said. "Seems like she broke from her mother long enough to visit her Dad. But somehow I don't think she was pleased with him. Her mother had money of her own an' likely Joan was brought up refined an' all. Likely her ol' Dad an' the rough-and-ready Corner folks was too much for her."

"Yeh, she told me that the place smelled an' she'd be glad to get away. But she was troubled 'bout somethin' deeper than that, an' I sure wish I knew what it was. An' I wish I knew how come she was visitin' saloons, lookin' for Mike Renny."

"If she's mixed up with that coyote, she's jus' naturally in trouble."

Ez Baxter enjoyed his stay with August, but was anxious to get on with the task he'd set himself. He mounted his horse and headed back for the Corner, fighting a problem.

I'd better work on the Renny angle next, he thought. *I'd sure like to meet that hombre.*

The riverbank trail was as lonely as before. In the brooding silence of night he camped, pushing on again next morning before the sunlight had angled into the canyon. The hours dragged by as his mount pounded the difficult, rock-strewn trail with patient hoofs, and as he paused for food and drink at noon, it seemed that there was only himself and the horse in all the world. Then he heard the shot.

It cracked up and down canyon walls with a noise like echoing thunder. Just the one shot. The drinking horse jerked its head in fright and froze. But no whine of bullet had menaced him, and he heard the thump of hoofs, galloping away.

He swung to his saddle and urged his mount forward. He went up a rise of the river bank and swerved between a scatter of boulders. Then he saw three things, all in one startled glance.

First, there was the body of a man sprawled across the trail, maybe twenty yards ahead. Then there was the riderless horse that had plunged off the trail and was nosing the water of the river. And thirdly there was a rider and horse flying hell for leather beyond, headed west along the trail.

The picture was clear to anyone with an eye to see, and Baxter didn't hesitate. As he leaped his mount safely across the sprawled body, he had a glimpse of a thin old face drawn in pain, a great mop of white hair straggling from under a dusty hat, and a red stain of blood spreading across a thin chest. Next moment Baxter was riding hard after the distant horseman and drawing his silver-butted Colt for action.

HE THREW two shots as the horseman swung from view over a rise. Baxter urged his mount up the rise and saw the fugitive making for a timber-bordered curve of the trail. The guy was looking back and there was a gun in his hand. He threw shots at Baxter, but the range was too much for the man, as it had been for Ez Baxter.

He turned back. In a few moments he was bending over the moaning old-timer and holding a water-bottle to thin lips. The hombre was conscious, and he sipped. Then he forced a pale grin at Baxter.

"Ain't no use, mister. Thanks for your help. . . but I'm done for."

"Don't say that," Baxter frowned. "You'll be all right. I'll get you to town, to a doctor—". .

"Ain't no use. I tell you. . ." A ter-

rible greyness came over the thin face and Baxter knew that he spoke the truth. Struggling for breath, the man said, "Look out for...Renny, stranger. Mike Renny—a bad hombre...an' he'll be after you...now."

"After me? Why?"

"You seen him...kill me...didn't you...?"

And that was all. The smile froze on the thin face, and it was dead. Baxter frowned. He listened, but heard no thump of returning hooves along the trail. Yet he knew that this victim of Renny's had told the truth. Evidently the man that Baxter was so eager to meet, that Mike Renny, had just committed murder, and he sure wouldn't rest until he'd silenced the man who'd blundered into the scene.

He led the riderless horse from the river and put the dead man across the saddle, roping him there. Then he mounted his own horse and rode west, leading the other. As he rounded curves and topped rises in the trail he scanned the distance clearly, always waiting for an ambushing attack from Renny. It was only a matter of time, he thought.

But the afternoon wore on without any attack. Baxter thought: *Of course. He thinks he killed his victim outright. And I didn't get close enough to Renny to recognise him, so he figures he's safe.*

He began wondering who the dead man was. He hadn't remembered seeing him around Leroy's Corner. At sundown, when he struck camp and relieved the stranger's horse from its burden, he went through the dead man's pockets.

There were no personal papers nothing to show identity. There was a few dollars in silver, and an ancient tobacco pouch with the initials K.G.D. in faded letters at one corner. That was about all. The man carried no gun, and his clothes were the shabby garb of an indoor worker, rather than the heavy and colorful checks of the backwoodsman.

An indoor worker. Ez Baxter frowned in thought. Initials K.G.D.—Kel Davenport! The name popped into Baxter's mind at once. Why, he didn't know, unless it was because of the association, in his mind, between Mike Renny and Joan Davenport.

Was he really Kel Davenport? If so, why had he been headed for Kuska? And why had Mike Renny followed and shot him down?"

These and other questions nagged at Baxter's mind as he built a small fire for coffee. But his thoughts were shattered by the sound of a snapping twig close by, and as he jerked his head sideways a voice said, "Don't move, fella, or I'll blast you apart!"

- 5 -

EZRA BAXTER stood up slowly, his hands going up to obey the motioning gun of the man who stepped into the firelight. Baxter was careful not to make any sudden move, because he recognised the newcomer and knew that this was a bad spot to be in.

"Hello, Sergeant Pello," he drawled. "You're just in time for coffee. If you'll let me lower these hands—"

"Like hell!" Pello's fleshy face twisted in a sneer. He stepped forward and yanked Baxter's Colt from its holster. Then he said, "Keep 'em up anyway. You might have a knife hid somewhere, for all I know. I don't trust you, Baxter, if that's your name."

"I don't trust you either," Baxter smiled. "That's your real worry, Pello ...I don't trust you."

That one was a bit subtle for Pello. He scowled. He jerked his big head at the figure that lay on the ground at the edge of the firelight. "Who is he?"

"You tell me. I'm a stranger round here."

The sergeant kept Baxter covered while he went for a brief but unnecessary look at the body. He came back and said, "It's the newspaper fella, Kel Davenport. Why'd you kill him, Baxter?"

"He beat me at cribbage," Baxter grinned. "I sure hate to be beat at cribbage."

The big policeman spat in the fire, his forty-five menacing Baxter. "You killed him all right. I spotted you trailin' the body. I followed you, kinda curious. Now its plain what you was up to. You figured to hide Davenport some place after dark, huh?"

"Damn you, Pello," Baxter said tightly. "Quit foolin'. There's only you an' me here, so why pretend? Likely you know that Davenport was murdered by your friend Mike Renny—it's a cinch that you know I didn't kill him. Now I know why Renny didn't come back to get me. You had a plumb better idea, huh?"

There was a crafty smile in the sergeant's eyes, and a purr in his voice as he said, "What would I do after nabbin' a killer? I'm bringin' you back to the Corner for trial, o' course."

"You're a liar. You wouldn't dare take me to town, an' you know it." He spoke easily, facing Pello across the fire, his hands at shoulder level and his brain working fast.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you an' that Mike Renny are in trouble up to your crooked necks. There're things I can't figure yet, but there're others I can. Pello, you polecat, you shot an innocent half-breed to cover up a killing, an' now you sure ain't gonna let me get back to town to talk 'bout the Davenport murder. No, sir! You're figurin' to play the same game once more—kill me, then go back an' say that I killed Davenport, tried to escape from you, an' you had to shoot. Stop me if I'm wrong."

"I ain't stoppin' you." Pello licked fleshy lips. "You're a smart fella, Baxter, but this's where you bow out. Pity you had to horn in on somethin' that was none o' your business, huh? I'm—"

BAXTER'S movement was blindingly fast, his long legs kicking viciously at the fire. Burning brands and sparks showered at the sergeant, and Baxter dived in their wake. Pello crashed a shot to accompany his yell of anger, but he was already staggering under Baxter's weight and the bullet spanged among trees. Then the two Men were locked in combat, and rolling.

Pello still had his own .45 in his right hand and was trying to get it against Baxter's head. Baxter chopped at his wrist. Then he got both hands to the policeman's throat, but Pello's gun hand came up again and the barrel cracked Baxter's temple.

There was one sickening moment when he thought he would pass out, and knowing that death would be the penalty he fought to keep his senses. Somehow he got an arm up to shield his head from another clubbing blow, then he squirmed across Pello's body, got his bared teeth to the gunwrist, and bit hard.

There was a cursing roar from Pello and he dropped the .45. The two men rolled in the dust, fighting and snarling with angry effort. Pello plunged a hand inside his shirt and brought forth the Colt he had taken from Baxter. Baxter smashed a fist at his face and felt bone crunch and blood spatter: Pello screamed like a woman and fired a shot which burned Baxter's arm. Baxter got both hands to the Colt and wrenched it free.

They rolled. From the light of the fire behind, Baxter saw the crazy rage of Pello's eyes amid the bloodied face. With a huge effort the policeman tried to hurl Baxter into the fire, doubling his legs and heaving viciously.

Baxter spun away but saved himself at the very edge of the fire. One hand had the colt, the other pressed palm downward for a moment on burning ashes. Then with maniacal speed and

rage, the policeman scrambled to his feet, ran forward, and aimed a mighty kick at Baxter's head. Baxter raised the Colt and shot him a moment before the kick grazed his forehead.

Pello did a kind of one-legged dance of surprise, then collapsed as Baxter rolled out from under. Even as he fell, Baxter saw the bullethole in his throat. Pello fell across the fire and didn't flinch. He was past flinching.

Ez Baxter staggered to the fire and kicked the dead man away. With a booted foot he killed the little flames that had taken hold on Pello's clothing. He thought: *I've killed him. Likely I've done Leroy's corner a good turn at that. But the law is dead against the killin' of police troopers, an' mebbe I'd better keep this night's work to myself.*

When he'd recovered sufficient strength he dragged Pello's body away off the trail. Under the bright stars he found a place of broken rocks and pebbles. He made a mound of cover the dead man. Then he stayed away from the camp for a while, alive to the possibility of Mike Renny coming to see what was keeping Pellow so long.

That was the way Baxter had it figured. And for that reason he kept clear of the fire for the rest of the night, resting in a dark place among the undergrowth where, if he fell asleep, stealthy death was less likely to find him. He abandoned all thoughts of a meal. Somehow he seemed to have lost his appetite.

HE DID fall asleep at last. It was nearly sun-up when he awoke. He stretched his stiff body and went back to the camp. And he swore softly. There had been a visitor in the night. Kel Davenport's body had vanished.

Baxter congratulated himself on staying away from the camp. Mike Renny would have killed him otherwise. Obviously he had tired of waiting for Pello to return, had gone to investigate. The absence of both Pello and Baxter sure must have puzzled him. But in case anything had gone wrong and Baxter was still alive, he had taken Davenport's body—the evidence of his guilt—and disposed of it somewhere.

Renny did not return. Ez Baxter packed up, bathed his bullet-burned arm and bound it, and pushed on.

Throughout the day he kept a keen lookout for the enemy, half expecting an ambush. At places he saw hoof-marks on the trail, fresh ones. They were headed toward town and were dug deeply, which made them plain to pick out from older tracks. Baxter figured that they were made by Renny's horse and it had been travelling very fast. It seemed to indicate that there would be no attempt at an ambush.

There wasn't. Baxter made camp again at sundown, and once more spent the night well away from it. He pushed on in the morning and loped his dusty mount into Leroy's corner at noon.

Tired and sweating, he turned in his horse at the town corral, went to his hotel for a bath and change, then considered what to do next. He figured that maybe it was his painful duty to visit the Davenport girl before he did anything else.

It was a task he was going to hate, but it had to be done. He went past the empty Police office and along to the *Bulletin* premises. The place was closed, of course, but maybe Joan would be out back somewhere. He rapped at the door.

There was no anwer. He knocked several times, with no result. He wondered if the girl was out. He wondered where she'd been going. He turned to pass on, and for no reason at all he flung a last look back at the frame window. He was quick-eyed enough to catch the rustle of the curtain beyond

and knew that somebody inside had been watching him.

He walked away. He turned left down a passage between buildings, then left again and back to the rear of the *Bulletin* office. There was a tiny yard full of rubbish. He climbed the rickety fence.

A moment later he was at the back door of the building. Under his hunched weight it crashed open. There was a kitchen, and a doorway to another room. Joan Davenport stood framed in the doorway, rounded breasts heaving under the light dress she wore, a heavy sixgun in one hand. She said, "How dare you force your way in here!"

Baxter took in her white-faced tension and remembered his sad mission. "I'm right sorry, ma'm. I knocked at the front door, but you didn't answer. I thought mebbe somethin' was wrong."

She kept him covered, the gun unwavering. "I don't trust anybody in this nest of crooks and hooligans. Get out! Don't imagine that because I'm alone at the moment I can't defend myself."

"That's what I've come about," Baxter said. "Your being alone, I mean. I...I don't know how to tell you... your father—"

"My father has gone to Kuska to see his only friend, but he'll be back any time now—"

"I'm sorry," Baxter said. "He won't be back. Not ever. I'm sad to have to tell you...that your father is dead, Miss Davenport."

There, it was out. He knew that he'd been clumsy and brutal. But the breakup he'd feared didn't occur. Joan Davenport went a little limp, that was all, the gun lowering slightly.

"Dead?" Then after a long-range searching of his face she said, "How...?"

"Murdered. I stumbled on to the killin'. I chased the killer an' he got away. But I'll get him. It's a promise."

"Murdered!" the girl breathed, her hand with the gun fell limply to her side, but she didn't cry. "So they got him. That's what he was afraid of. That's why he was going to see his friend, Jim August."

"You mean...you know who killed your father?"

"Of course. Pello and Renny. My father knew too much, you see. I... don't know why I'm talking to you like this, Mr. Baxter. For all I know you may be an enemy also."

BAXTER made allowances for the girl who'd just lost her father, but after the allowances were made he still felt a little angry. "Look...Miss Davenport...I'm gettin' kinda tired of bein' told that this's none o' my business. Pello could've killed me about as easily as I killed him, luck goin' his way instead o' mine. I figure I'm entitled to a little co-operation from you. And it ain't only your Dad I'm avengin'. A good friend o' mine was killed, which is how I came to mix with this thing in the first place. Now will you please quit weighing up what good it'll do you, an' start thinkin' about how much it'll help me for a change? I sure would appreciate it."

She frowned at him, thinking over what he'd said. Then, "Who was he... your friend who was killed, I mean?"

"Fella named Guy Malone. Saved my life once. Was murdered on Mount Robson. I'm purty sure that either Pello or Renny killed him. If you'll just—"

"Then he'll be the one who wrote to my father. Your friend Malone, I mean. That's what it's all about."

"Malone wrote to your Dad?" Ez Baxter said. "Why? Was he a friend of your father's?"

"I don't think so. It was just that Dad ran the newspaper here, and as Malone felt that he might be in danger he wrote his letter to the newspaper."

"Guy Malone in danger?" Baxter

frowned. "I don't understand. Suppose you start in at the beginnin' an' tell me everything, huh?"

"All right." She sighed, went to a chair and sat wearily. "It seems that Mr. Malone came into possession of a gold-mine, the other side of Mount Robson. He wanted to keep it a secret. He used to dig the gold, take it to Pine Falls in Columbia and sell it to the bank there. But two people stumbled across his secret. Malone told Dad all this in his letter, you see."

"But why did he write the letter?"

"I'll come to that in a moment. But first, about the two men who found out about the gold-mine. The first was a trapper named...oh, I've forgotten. I think it was King, or something." Baxter thought of King Farley, and nodded. There was no point in telling her that Farley was the man who'd annoyed her in the saloon, and he said, "Who was the other?"

"Mike Renny. One day Renny was in the bank at Pine Falls and saw Malone cashing his gold. Later, back at his diggings, Malone suspected that he'd been trailed from Pine Falls. He found sign backtrail, he said, then saw the glint of binoculars watching him from a far ridge as he dug for his gold. He wrote that he suspected Renny, never having liked the man and not trusting him. I'm not good at telling this, Mr. Baxter. Have I made it clear?"

"You're doin' fine," Baxter encouraged. "And I'm beginnin' to understand why the letter was written. Malone didn't mind the trapper knowin' his secret, but he sure was wary o' Renny, huh?"

"That was it, exactly. So he wrote the letter to Dad, and on his next trip to Pine Falls he mailed it. A couple of weeks ago, my father received it."

"That so?" Baxter did mental gymnastics, figuring that the letter must have taken five weeks or so to reach the Corner. He remarked on it, and the girl nodded.

"My father did the obvious thing," Joan went on. "He showed the letter to Sergeant Pello, who represents the Law here at Leroy's Corner." she frowned bitterly. "We know now, of course, that it was the worst thing he could have done.

"Dad naturally expected Pello to investigate. The next thing we knew, there was a visit from Mike Renny. I wasn't here...I'd gone to the store to buy groceries. When I returned, I found Dad very sick and the office just about wrecked. Renny had beaten up my father and warned him of what would happen unless he forgot all about the Malone killing. He made Dad hand over the letter, too. When I got back here and saw what had happened I was furious. That was the night I met you, Mr. Baxter. I wanted to tell Renny what I thought of him. It sounds silly and futile now, I suppose ...but I was just bubbling with anger. I had to do something. I found Renny eventually...but of course he only laughed at me and insulted me."

- 6 -

THE REST of Joan Davenport's story ran along obvious lines. Ez Baxter could have finished it for her. In a quandary about the killing of Guy Malone and the guilt of Pello and Renny, and no longer sure about who he could trust in town, Kel Davenport had tried to reach Jim August.

That was as far as the girl's story could go.

Baxter figured the remainder. Pello and Renny had followed the old newspaper man and Renny had done the killing. When Baxter had come on the scene, Renny had kept out of range while Pello moved in to add another

victim to the murder list. It was the age-old story of one murder leading to others, but this time the play had gone wrong, and one of the killers was now dead.

But the thing troubling him at the moment was what to do about it. Likely the folks at the Corner were used to Pello's absences from town, and a few days would pass before they realised that he was missing. By the time they finished searching and had accepted that the sergeant had vanished for certain and must be replaced, and by the time the north-west police authorities had sent a new officer to take over, it was going to be a bit late to charge Renny with murder.

At the moment, there was no law in Leroy's Corner. And even if there had been, Renny would have been safe enough. Malone's letter about him had been destroyed, and Kel Davenport's body hidden or otherwise disposed of. There was no evidence that Mike Renny had killed. It was a problem that had to be overcome, and Baxter saw only one solution.

These thoughts played through his brain as he said to Joan Davenport, "What d'you figure to do now, ma'm?"

"I suppose I'll go back to Boston. There's nothing else for me. And yet..." She hesitated, shrugging helplessly.

"And yet what?" Baxter asked. "You'll be right happy to leave this backwoods town, won't you?"

"Yes...in a way. I would have, before this happened. But now, it somehow goes against the grain to go away and leave my father's death unaccounted for. Do you know what I mean, Mr. Baxter?"

"Sure, I do." He looked at her, his lean face fixed in serious lines. "Your father's been murdered an' one of the killers is still walkin' around free. But that's somethin' I aim to do somethin' about, Miss Joan."

All her hostility had gone now. She seemed to see Ez Baxter at last, for what he was, reckless and tough, maybe, but straight as any man could be. She said, "I'm sure you'll do your best, Mr. Baxter."

"Every time you call me that I kinda look over my shoulder to see who you're talkin' to," he smiled. "My friends call me Ez."

"All right...Ez. But as I was going to say...I don't quite see how you can do anything. Pello is dead, you say, and at the moment there is no law in town. And even if there were—"

"There's other ways of punishing killers," he said harshly.

"Yes," Joan said, her voice soft and a little scared. "But those methods only make you a killer yourself. In the eyes of the law, I mean."

"Mebbe not," Baxter smiled. "There's jus' one thing though. If you're figurin' to stay in town for awhile, be mighty careful. Keep your doors locked an' barred. Don't go out after dark. You know, stayin' for awhile is likely the best thing you could do. Because while Renny still lives, he's rememberin' that you know about Malone's letter. If you left town, likely he'd try to follow you like he followed your father, figurin' to silence you in some lonely place. So please, Joan, stay indoors...until I kinda remove the Renny menace. Will you promise?"

"All right," the girl said. "I'll do as you say."

HE WENT to the *Log Cabin*. King Farley, who had brushed the doctor aside and left his sick-bed days ago, was at the bar and telling a group of drinkers about the time he'd fought a bear in the Rockies. Then he saw Baxter and finished with, "but the toughest fight I ever had was with a danged gambler called Baxter... though what we was fightin' about I can't remember. Howdy, Baxter!"

Baxter smiled, called for drinks all

round, and said, "Gents, supposin' you ever have the choice o' fightin' King Farley or a bear, take the bear. It'll be plumb easier."

There was laughter from all but Farley, who scowled with his own brand of pleasure. Leaving the others interested in the drinks, pulled the big trapper aside and quietly told him of the adventures down-river. Then he said, "I want you to do something for me, King."

"It's as good as done," Farley growled. "I'll find that Renny rat an' smash him with my bare hands. I'll—"

"Hold on!" Baxter said, his eyes slitted and hard. "Renny's my meat. I'm gona fix him...kill him in front o' witnesses in such a way that there'll be no kickback against me. But until I do, I'll be kinda worried 'bout the Davenport gal. There're things I don't know yet, an' one of 'em is whether Renny's got other friends in the Corner. He might have. He might get 'em to help him. So while I'm fixin' to kill him. I want somebody to guard that gal at night. See what I mean?"

"Sure do. You're scared the gal might get what her ol' man got, huh?"

"You're got it, big fella. And...wal, I ain't made many real friends here, but...wal, Guy Malone sure trusted you, an' that's good enough for me. You wanta help me out?"

"Baxter," the trapper said, "I'll guard that gal so good her own mother won't get to see her without a wrote permit from you."

"Good enough," Baxter said. "Watch the *Bulletin* place. She's there. She'll be safe enough in daylight, but guard her at night. I'll take over at midnight each night, until I manage to kill Mike Renny."

Baxter went next to the fat Roy Tollice and quietly asked for some information. "I'm interested in Mike Renny. Mainly, is he a gambler?"

"Who ain't?" The barkeep looked curiously at Baxter. "Renny plays a game o' cards now an' then like everyone. But he ain't a heavy gambler. Too mean, I reckon. He'd sooner make a certainty of more money than risk the money he's got."

"But when he does play, does he play here?"

"Likely as not. Why, Baxter?"

"I'm kinda anxious to get in a game with him," Baxter said.

He was about to walk away, then thought of something. He'd meant to ask Farley, but had forgotten.

"Mebbe I oughta know what this Mike Renny looks like. Only glimpse I've had o' him so far was from the back, at high speed, with gunsmoke kinda hazin' the atmosphere."

"That sounds mighty excitin'. Did he know it was you chasin' him?"

"I can't be sure. Not that it'll matter. When I sit into a game with him in a crowded saloon, he sure won't bring up the subject o' gunsmoke. Now tell me...what does he look like?"

"What would a no-good hombre like him look like! Kinda skinny build an' slightly hunched in the shoulders. Foxy eyes, most always lookin' at you from half-closed lids, and a long nose what's kinda broke off-centre. If you see a guy an' he looks like the most ornery cuss you ever did see, then he's Mike Renny."

"There's times when I figure you don't like him much," Baxter grinned.

THAT NIGHT he hung about the *Log Cabin* while King Farley took up his sentry duty outside the Davenport place. Mike Renny came into the saloon at a late hour, and as he breasted the bar, answering Tollice's description perfectly, Ez Baxter glanced at the barkeep and saw the assenting grin in the fat man's eyes.

But Renny didn't show any interest in cards. He seemed worried, talking briefly with Tollice, drinking three quick whiskies, and going out again.

"What's he het up about?" Baxter asked Tollice.

"Seems he's anxious to see Bill Pello, but the sergeant ain't in town. Asked me to watch out an' let him know if he gets in late tonight."

"You can let me know, too," Baxter said. "I ain't never believed in ghosts, but I've got an open mind 'bout 'em."

He lingered long enough to see the slow, incredulous delight in Tollice's eyes, then walked out. At midnight he relieved King Farley, who reported all quiet at the Davenport house. Nothing happened during Baxter's shift, and he went back to his room at sunup.

The next day passed in pretty much the same way. Baxter haunted the *Log Cabin* and other saloons but waited in vain for Renny to join a poker game.

For two more days the watching of Renny brought nothing but the knowledge that he had a friend. On three separate occasions he spoke and drank with a bowlegged man in trapper's clothes, a man of squat build with heavy shoulders and neck, and a thick chest. Baxter went to Roy Tollice for the lowdown.

"Nate Laurue," Tollice said. "Silent sorta hombre, never mixes much. Never saw him friendly with Renny before, either. That help you any?"

"Mebbe," Baxter said, thinking that any friend of Renny's was bound to mean trouble. And that night, at the *Log Cabin,* Renny at last decided to play a game of poker, and Baxter forgot Laurue.

This was the thing he'd been waiting for. With almost indecent haste he strode to where Renny and two other men sat at a table cutting cards. With a friendly grin he said, "Excuse me, gents, but if you're lookin' for a fourth deal me in."

"We wasn't lookin' for no fourth." Mike Renny looked at Baxter with unmasked hate. "We was figurin' a cosy game, jus' the three of us."

"That's so?" Baxter shrugged. "Shucks...I've been tryin' to get into a game all evenin'. Mind if I sit an' watch?"

Renny did mind, but could hardly object. He stared at Baxter, and Ez Baxter knew that even if the ruckus downriver had been short and kind of long-ranged. Renny had seen enough to remember. Then another player said, "Hell, four's better 'an three. Let him play, huh?"

"In an 'out," Baxter said, smiling and staring at Renny.

Renny scowled, flipped the cards from hand to hand, then plunked them on the table. Over-ruled by force of numbers, he said, "All right...there they are. Cut."

Renny drew a king and won the deal. He riffled the cards. "A busk to buy, an' a buck to play. Five-dollar raises. Or is that too penny-ante for Baxter the great gambler?"

"You know 'bout me, huh?"

"Some." There was a sneer curling Renny's thin lips. "I've got a friend who tells me you're a friend o' the late Guy Malone."

Bill Pello had reported his visit, Baxter thought. He enjoyed Renny's worry, now that Pello was missing and Baxter was safe and sound, a state of affairs exactly the opposite to what had been planned downriver. Baxter said, "Bad medicine, that. What happened to Malone, I mean. That reminds me..." he grinned into Renny's slitted eyes. Have you seen Sergeant Pello around lately?"

Renny didn't answer. There was a moment of enlightment, and a darkening of the hate in his eyes. "You ain't answered my question. Before I deal, is five-dollar raises good enough for you?"

"Sure, sure," Baxter said. "I'm only playin' for the enjoyment I'll get outa it."

RENNY won the first hand after one or two small bets. Jack Kurry won the second. Then Baxter dealt

and Renny won forty dollars when his full-house beat all opposition. The fourth dealer was a man they called Seth, and Renny again pulled in a good jackpot.

That was a good start, for the peculiar kind of game that Baxter intended to play. The early luck was Renny's and the other players would remember. Then Renny lost the next two games, neither of which involved much money. That was no good at all, and when Baxter dealt he put it right once more. Renny hooked in a thirty-eight dollar jackpot.

Ez Baxter was a natural gambler, but that was only part of it. He also had the long, clever fingers that made manipulation of cards easy for him, and the kind of quick mind which had absorbed every trick known to the gambling profession and which had figured out others besides.

Once or twice before, in his long career at the tables, Baxter had dealt crooked cards. But never with a view to winning money. To cheat for other people's money was a thing that revolted him. The only time he ever cheated was when he wanted some one else to win.

That was the game he played now. Mike Renny was having a fair run of luck, but the run was vastly improved by the fact that he always won Baxter's deal. The reason for that was that Baxter dealt him the best hands.

Mike Renny began to enjoy himself. And why not? There was a stack of dollars at his elbow and it grew bigger all the time. The crooked-nosed hombre sneered a few remarks about the great Baxter who was supposed to be "one hell of a cardplayer," and Baxter smiled.

"A man can't win when the luck's against him." He looked at Renny and said, a shade softer, "Your luck... your luck Renny, is danged uncanny."

"It sure is," Renny grinned—then the grin faded and his shrewd little eyes closed to slits, and he said, "What d'you mean, Baxter?"

Baxter shrugged. "I mean what I say. Your luck's uncanny. You're winnin' two hands in every four...mebbe this's your night, huh?"

Without seeming to look, he saw Kurry and Seth glance at Renny and then at each other. Kurry won the next hands, three in a row, but none were worth much money. When at last there was a spate of brisk betting and the centre grew to sixty dollars. Mike Renny's ace-high in hearts was too good and he added the sixty to his winnings.

"Any time you fellas wanta quit," he grinned, "I'll—"

"I ain't quitting," Baxter said quickly. "You've got a lotta my money there an' I aim to get some of it back. Damn it...your luck can't last forever."

"It'll last longer 'an your money."

"Wal..." Jack Kurry said, "It'll mebbe last longer an' mine. I'll be quittin' purty soon."

"Me, too," Seth said. "Man's only throwin' his money away, against the kinda luck Mike's havin'."

"Stick around, fellas," Baxter said, and then there was a sudden hardness to his voice as he said, "Mike's luck'll change soon. Take my word for it."

And now was the time, he thought. It had to happen while Kurry and Seth were still there. He wanted them as witnesses when he killed Mike Renny.

- 7 -

FOR THREE days Ez Baxter had waited for this moment. For three days he'd walked around prepared for it. The preparation was very simple, consisting of a spare ace of hearts in his pocket, and the loaded Colt

eased nicely in the holster at his thigh.

It was Mike Renny's deal. He flipped the cards casually, the grin splitting his thin face. At the moment he was on top of the world, even though there was business which would have to be got through later. Baxter knew too much. He knew about the killing of Kel Davenport, and likely he knew about who'd really killed Malone. It meant that Baxter himself would have to die, and pronto. But he'd worry about that later. Right now he was sitting there raking in money, and money was the thing he loved above all else.

Jack Kurry threw his hand away in disgust. Baxter bought two cards. Seth and Renny bought one each. Johnson bet five dollars. Seth raised it five. Mike Renny was grinning at his hand and quickly raised the centre another five. Baxter had a hunch that this might be a chance. He threw his hand in.

He didn't want to be involved in the play when the great revelation came. That way, nobody would dream of suspecting him. He hoped this was it. He watched Seth and Renny settle down to steady betting, and both seemed confident. Yes, thought Baxter, this is it. They've both got powerful hands and powerful hands always feature aces.

Casually yet deceivingly, his long fingers snaked the spare ace from his pocket. Then he watched Seth and Renny begin to slow up the betting, each searching the other's face and studying cards before pushing more dollars to the centre.

By the time the jackpot had grown to near a hundred dollars, all Baxter's doubts were gone. Both men had really good cards, and this was the moment he'd been waiting for. He tensed himself.

"That's as much as I've got," Seth said. He equalled Renny's last bet. "I'll look at you."

"Aw, don't quit because you're outa cash," Renny grinned. "You got a hoss, ain't you? You got a good saddle—"

"Ain't bettin' my hoss an' saddle, Mike. They're my livin'. I've done paid to see your cards, so you'd better show 'em."

"All right, all right." Mike fanned his cards face upward on the table. "There you are...acehigh, all hearts."

"Damn!" Seth slapped his cards down, three aces and a pair of queens. "See you again sometime, gents," and went to get up. At the same time Mike Renny began to gather in the money.

BAXTER stopped them both, with a voice like the crack of a wip.

"Wait! There's somethin' wrong here!"

Renny froze, the smile dying on his greedy face. "What's the matter with you, Baxter?"

"Nothin'," Baxter snapped. "But there's somethin' the matter with that last hand. Hell..no wonder your damned luck's been so good, Renny. You've been helpin' it along."

"Talk English! What do you mean?"

"I mean that you dealt Seth a come-on hand an' gave yourself a better one." Baxter was tense, waiting for the first flicker of action. He said, "You've been doin' it all evening! Dealin' cold cards. You're a doggoned crooked polecat, Renny, an' if you've got any guts you'll call me for sayin' so!"

"I'm callin' you!"

It was almost a scream, born of a rage beyond control. Renny shot to his feet and kicked his chair away, one hand punging to the fun at his side. Men scattered from the line of fire. Mike Renny's gun came out and its voice was a thunderclap.

Nobody saw Baxter's gun come out. One moment he seemed to be facing Renny, the taunting words spitting from his lips. The next moment he had swivelled sideways on

his chair and the silver-butted Colt was somehow in his right hand, and adding its thunder to Renny's.

Each gun fired one shot. Renny's bullet, fired in blind anger, grooved the table and spanged close to Baxter's ribs. Baxter's slug found a mark in Renny's heart and the thin man was dead before he hit the floor.

There was a moment of silence. Baxter's hand was shaking, now that it was all over and the long tension relaxed. He sheathed his gun. "Gents...I guess you heard him call me. And he shot first, huh?"

"He sure did," Jack Kurry said. "You're in the clear, Baxter. But there's one thing I wanta know. How'd you work it out that Renny was cheating?"

"He was tryin' to handle too many aces, an' they kinda got outa control. Have a look at my discarded hand, there on the table."

Kurry turned the five cards face upward. There were two tens, two jacks and an ace—the ace of hearts.

"An ace too many," Seth said. "Say, he sure slipped up that time!"

"An I guess that kinda cancels the night's play, huh?" Baxter said. "If you two fellas remember what you started with, take your money an' I'll take mine. We'll leave Renny's for his friends to take charge of, if he had any friends."

Later, Baxter went to the bar for a badly needed drink. Roy Tollice said, "Mister, that was the most interestin' game o' poker I ever did see."

"Let it be a lesson to you. Never take up gamblin' unless you can shoot quick an' straight."

He left the saloon. He walked around under the stars, too stirred up inside for sleeping. He'd squared things for Guy Malone, and hoped that Guy knew, wherever he was. He'd squared for that half-breed Willie Feather, too, and for Kel Davenport. And that brought his thoughts to Joan. Her danger was over, now. It might be an idea to go tell her, he thought.

He went to the *Bulletin* office. He found the big King Farley lounging in the shadows opposite. Farley said, "You're early. It ain't midnight yet."

"You can go home," Baxter said. "There's no danger for the gal now. Renny an' I kinda had a little argument over cards, an' he's dead. Thanks for your help, Farley."

Farley lumbered away and Baxter went across to the Bulletin house. He rapped loudly at the door. There was no answer. No sound inside, no lights. He grinned at his foolishness. Of course, the girl wouldn't answer a night-caller, after he'd warned her not to.

He thought of the last time he'd called on her. He went round to the rear. He was approaching the tiny yard when a vague figure loomed against the night sky, crouching on top of the fence. A moment later the figure dropped heavily to the ground and started to move along in the shadows of the fence.

Baxter quickly blocked the movement, stepping close to the fence and saying, "Hey... who're you... what're you doing?"

THERE WAS growl of surprise, then sudden action. Something crashed at Baxter's face and he staggered back. The dark figure tried to dart past, but Baxter recovered in time to plant a foot in the way.

The intruder hurtled in the dust, gasping and swearing. Baxter went to fall on him, but an orange flash split the darkness and a shot thundered. Baxter felt the breeze of the slug on his face, flattened against the fence, jerked his Colt from his thigh and threw a shot, as the figure, scrambling quickly to its feet, sprinted away in the darkness. Baxter sent another shot crashing away, but there was nothing to shoot at. In the following silence he

listened. There was no sound. The stranger had got clear away and it would be useless, perhaps even very dangerous, to try to follow in the treacherous dark.

Baxter couldn't get across the yard quickly enough. When he reached the flimsy back door it was swinging idly on its hinges. It meant that the intruder had certainly been inside, and Baxter's heart thumped in alarm for the girl.

He called her name loudly. His voice seemed to echo in the empty house. Fumbling with flaring matches, he found an oil lamp and lit it. The kitchen was empty, and he went from room to room, still calling Joan's name.

But each room was like the last, empty of life. He worked right through to the big front room where the *Corner Bulletin* had been produced, but there was no sign of Joan. Baxter frowned. He was baffled. The girl had promised not to leave the place at night. Then a new, frightening thought came to him, as again he remembered the intruder who'd thrown hot lead in his desperate getaway. Had he killed her?

Baxter walked about the town, looking for her. He looked in at cafes where they served late meals, but there was no sign of Joan. It didn't make sense that she should go to a saloon, yet he looked in them anyway. It began to look like she'd vanished completely.

When he retired to his hotel room at last, the puzzle was still unsolved. And it was the first thing he thought about next morning when he awoke. It was after sun-up and he quickly washed and dressed, hoping that the day might bring a solution to his problem—.

Then he saw the square of paper on the floor, near his door.

He picked it up. He saw the penned message, and the dirty heelmark imprinted across it, and even before he read the words he knew that the message had been there on the floor last night, but in the dim lamplight he hadn't noticed it. It had been slid under the door during his absence, and the heel-mark on it was his own.

"Dear Mr. Baxter," he read, "I am too scared to stay here alone any longer. I am planning to slip away today at noon and try to make it to Mr. August's place at Kuska. He will know what to do to get me to the railhead at Merlton, from where I can head back to Boston. Mr. August was my father's friend and I know I can trust him. Thank you for the kindness you showed, but I cannot stay at the Corner any longer. I am being watched every night, and it is very frightening. Last night I saw the face of a watcher across the street, as he flared a match to light a cigarette. It was that terrible man, that bearded ruffian who tried to molest me in the saloon that night. I nearly fainted with fear. I'll not stay in this house another night."

It was signed *"Joan Davenport."*

He wondered how she'd intended to reach Kuska. Not on foot, surely! It had taken Baxter three days to make the trip on a good horse.

There was one way to find out. He hurried to the town corral. The note had been written yesterday, which meant that Joan had been gone for maybe eighteen hours. That was bad.

He hated to think of her riding the lonely river trail, through country which held its quota of wild animals and wilder men. And it was a tricky trail that had to be ridden at a walk for most of the way. Overtaking anyone with so long a start would be hard indeed.

The old corral keeper said yes, Miss Davenport had left town yesterday, on a horse she'd bought from him.

"But could she ride?"

"Sure, mister. Had one o' them

dinky women's ridin' outfits like what's in them catalogues from the East. Sat the saddle like it was Uncle's armchair."

"Which way did she go?"

"Downstream, mister. Said somethin' about headin' for Kuska. But don't never tell her I told you, on account of she asked me not to say nothin' to no one."

Baxter headed back to his hotel. Passing the *Log Cabin*, King Farley burst into view from the swingdoors. The big trapper began to say that now was as good a time as any for a drink together, but Baxter cut him short.

"I've got a problem, big fella. D'you know this country well?"

"Every damn inch of it from Montana to Buffalo Lakes. "What's your problem?"

Baxter quickly told him. He finished up, "I've got a few reasons for wantin' to catch up with her soon as possible, but I'm danged if I know how it's to be done. You can't run a hoss for much o' that trail, an' she's had nearly a day's start. But the river kinda snakes about a lot, an' I was wondering whether there was any other trail cross-country, a way o' gettin' to some spot a long way down-river, but quick. Then I could mebbe head her off, or wait for her."

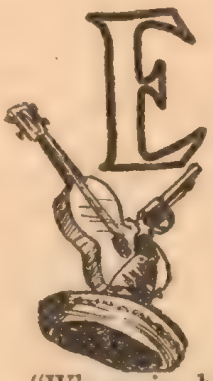
Farley scratched his wild thatch of hair. "Of all the damned fool things for a woman to do. That river trail ain't no Boston park-drive, as she'll danged soon find out. As for headin' her off..." He shrugged, and swept an arm toward the south-east and Kuska. "That's all mighty rough country, Baxter. All canyons an' boulder ridges. Ain't no open trails at all. Only way to Kuska is the one she took."

"I see." Baxter frowned glumly. "Then there's no way of catchin' up with the gal?"

"I didn't say that." A slow smile was spreading over the big man's face, and he clapped a heavy hand to Baxter's shoulder. "You go get your gear, I'll get mine. We'll meet here. You wanta get to the gal, I'll take you." Without another word the trapper lumbered away, and after one doubtful glance after him, Baxter hurried to his room.

As he packed his gear and paid his bill at the hotel, he wondered how in blazes the girl was going to be overtaken if there were no short-cut trails. Yet he put a lot of faith in King Farley, and remembered the slow, confident smile.

- 8 -



EZ BAXTER was lugging his packroll toward the town corral when King Farley hailed him from across the street. The trapper's packed gear rested at his feet, on the verandah of the *Log Cabin* saloon.

"Where in hell're you goin'?" he roared. "I said we'd meet here."

Baxter crossed the street and said, "I was goin' to the corral for my hoss, o' course. Where's yours?"

"Ain't got a hoss," Farley grinned. "Hosses are for cowpokes, which I ain't. You leave yours snug in the corral an' follow me."

Baxter shrugged, and obeyed. Grinning at his secret, the big man lumbered downtown and out of it, then headed for the gleaming river that was shot with silver in the morning sun.

"The river!" Baxter laughed. "Dang me for a fool! I plumb never thought of it."

"You ain't a northwoodsman, that's why. We folks know what rivers are for. That deerskin canoe at the end o' the line is mine."

They walked past twenty-odd canoes drawn up on the muddy bank. The craft were made of spruce framework and covered with drum-tight hides. They looked flimsy. Out in mid-

stream the river was running fast, emptying the mountains of rain and thawed ice. Baxter remembered some of the rough spots downstream, and was dubious.

"D'you figure we'll make it?"

"Why wouldn't we?" Farley stared at him in astonishment. "We'll make it faster than any clumsy-footed hoss along the bank, you bet."

"You should know," Baxter said. "But I seem to remember some danged rocky rapids between here an' Kuska."

"Rapids ain't nothin' to worry 'bout, so long's you know what you're doin'. Me, I ride 'em for sport. Let's get our stuff into the canoe."

Farley's craft was a long one, the frame solidly woven and the deerskin neatly sewn. There was a floor of latticed spruce saplings upon which they put their gear, Farley stacking it with expert knowledge as to where the weight should be.

Together they launched the canoe. Baxter took a seat forward, the giant Farley clambering aboard behind him and bringing the double-bladed paddle into play. A few moments later the craft was in midstream, and gathering way with the current.

"Better 'an any hoss!" Farley yelled, as the canoe swirled along.

Baxter was surprised at the speed. The light craft's high-arched bow seemed to cut the wind and slide over the top of the water, though back at Baxter's sides where the water swirled past there was less than six inches of freeboard.

Baxter looked at the few inches and thought about the coming rapids. To say the least, he thought, the rapids were going to be mighty interesting. But he had plenty of faith in Farley and wasn't worried. The big trapper was in his element, singing lustily, if not tunefully, as he dipped his paddle to keep the canoe straight in the current.

Baxter had glimpses of the riverbank trail drifting past, and said, "We are makin' speed, all right. How soon d'you figure we'll catch up with the gal?"

FARLEY took time out to think about it. Then, "Reckon we're goin' mebbe better 'an twice the speed of a walkin' hoss. You do the figurin' Baxter...I ain't good at it."

At that rate, Baxter thought, *we should reach her in nine or ten hours travelling time. And seeing that she had to stop and sleep last night, we've got a good chance of reaching her before sundown.* It was better than he hoped for.

He kept thinking about the previous night, too, and the affair of the intruder. He wondered whether maybe the hombre was just a petty thief snooping around, and was inclined to write it off at that.

And other thoughts in Baxter's mind were somewhat confused. For instance, he wondered what he was going to say to Joan when he caught up with her. One thing would be "was sure worried 'bout you riding the trail alone an' figured to kinda escort you." Another would be "Mike Renny is dead an' you've nothin' to fear in Leroy's Corner any more."

But there were still other things, and how could he put them into words? She was a quiet sort of person, refined and sensitive, and she sure hated the backwoods country and everybody in it, almost. How could he say, "shucks, Joan, I wish you weren't goin' back East. Why don't you marry me an' help me settle down some place, huh?"

He shook his head, unable to see himself pleading to the calm, reserved and lovely mask she seemed always to wear.

The river changed character frequently. Sometimes it raced narrow and deep between rocky wallls, sometimes it slowed wide and shallow. At the slow parts Farley added the force of his paddle to make better time. At noon they came to a wall-passage

where smooth boulders towered from the river. Here the stream flowed fast, and the trapper guided the canoe in zigzag fashion between the boulders. Baxter thrilled to the skillful handling, knowing that the craft could crumple itself to wreckage on any one of those rocks.

On a grassy banked stretch once more, the men stopped for a meal. They ate tinned beef and biscuit, and in twenty minutes were moving again. It was a journey which Baxter would have enjoyed, if anxiety for Joan hadn't filled his mind.

At places the river swirled over ledges to drop ten or twenty feet, but Farley always knew where they were and wasn't caught napping. He would bank the canoe when these places were reached, and the two men would carry it to a point beyond the fall and launch it again. And all the time Baxter watched the riverbank trail keenly.

As the afternoon wore on, he felt that Joan couldn't possibly be much farther along the trail. Then at last, when the sun had lowered to mid-afternoon, he saw a horse. He turned to Farley, yelling.

"There...on the right bank. Pull over."

But Farley had already seen the horse, and was nosing the canoe out of the fast midstream current. The horse was saddled and bridled but riderless. A saddlepack was strapped to the saddle, and the reins were trailing. The horse was grazing at a grassy stretch on the river bank below the trail.

Baxter looked this way and that, but saw no sign of a rider. The canoe oozed sloppily on to the mud at the river's edge and Baxter went over the side. He helped Farley to haul the canoe fast into the mud, then went to the horse. He had no way of knowing whether it was the one Joan had bought at the Corner.

He cupped his hands and yelled, but there was no answer. He climbed sloping ground to the trail and yelled again, up and down the narrow beaten track. His voice echoed along the river canyons.

HE WENT back to Farley. "Where's the rider of this cayuse, anyway? An' I sure wish I knew whether it's the one Joan was ridin'."

"There's a way to find out." Farley opened the saddlepack. In a moment he nodded, rummaging with one big hand and growling, "women's foolery. This's her hoss, all right. Wonder if mebbe she don't ride so well an' got throwed."

Baxter was already thinking of that. The idea of her lying hurt somewhere along the trail shocked him. He wondered whether to search up-trail or down. He began to play with a plan in which he would walk the rest of the way to Kuska while Farley went back to town, each searching the trail. Then Farley yelled.

The big trapper was down at the river again, sixty yards further along. He seemed to be interested in the muddy bank. Baxter ran to him, the obvious question on his lips. "What is it?"

"There's one hell of a mess o' mud here." Farley pointed to a deep, oozing groove and the vague marks of footprints which had melted out-of-shape and become little waterholes. Farley said. "Purty plain, huh? There's been another canoe pulled in here. See where its bottom grooved the mud, sort of? When we run our craft out it'll leave the same kinda mark. An' more than one person got into it, I reckon, judgin' by the mess o' footprints around. It might even be ..." He shrugged, and looked at Baxter. "It might even be that one somebody was kinda forced in against their will, huh?"

"It would explain everythin'," Baxter said tightly. "It would explain the riderless hoss, an' all. What...what d'we do now, woodsman?"

"We get back on the river an' paddle like hell."

The trapper hurried back to the ca-

noe, Baxter following. Baxter hated to accept the theory that Farley had voiced, but it seemed the only one that made sense. Unless the girl had been taken aboard by force, she would hardly have abandoned her horse and supplies to go river-riding.

The two men heaved the canoe down the muddy bank an clambered aboard as she floated. Farley got to work with his paddle, and soon they were speeding downstream. But Ez Baxter's anxiety was lined deeply in his lean face. He questioned his companion.

"What're our chances? I mean... the current'll be carryin' them an' us along at the same place, won't it?"

"Mebbe, mebbe not. I'm kinda addin' the arm-work to the drift, they might be jus' driftin'. After all, they got no reason to figure they're bein' chased. Then again, there're parts o' the river that run slow an' wide, an' parts where you've gotta carry your canoe for a way. Could be we'll catch up with 'em some place like that."

It was something to hope for, as the canoe swirled along the gurgling river, snaking between boulders and round curves. Baxter scanned ahead, despairing as the sun sank toward the edge of the world at the approach to each new bend in the stream he prayed that the canoe ahead would come to view. Then they came to a rocky, foaming cascade that had to be by-passed—or portaged, as Farley called it—and Baxter's hope soared again as they saw the mark's of where the first canoe had been portaged before them.

It was hard to tell how long ago the marks had been made, but Baxter thought they were fresher than the ones back at the place where they'd found the riderless horse. He said so, and Farley nodded.

"You're plumb right, Baxter. We're gainin', sure!"

But now the river got more rugged with every stretch, with a lot of portages to be made and sometimes mild rapids in between. Baxter was impatient, but Farley swore that the marks left by the enemy at each grounding-place were always fresher.

"An' I reckon I know why. These danged portages are helpin' us make big gains. Baxter, I figure that the gal was took by jus' one hombre, see. An' seein' that she's a prisoner, she sure ain't gonna help him carry the canoe. Our danged canoe's heavy enough with both of us luggin' it, but the hombre up ahead has gotta carry his on his own. I guess it's slowin' him up some, huh?"

AT SUNDOWN they still hadn't sighted their quarry, however. And now they were really in the rapids. This was the stretch of river Baxter had noticed during his trip to Kuska, and remembered. The stream was narrow between bouldered canyon walls for awhile, then spread wider and shallow to roar strongly across a downgrade that was just crowded with rocky obstacles.

The downgrade was maybe a mile long. It seemed to Baxter that they could never make it. But again he had under-estimated Farley's skill. The big trapper guided the frail, bobbing canoe between boulders in magical fashion, seeming to know instinctively which fury of foam was a thin layer over rock, and which had body enough to take the canoe's depth safely.

Sometimes the bow grazed solid rock and sometimes there were scraping bumps along the bottom. But in that maze of foam-lashed destruction it seemed incredible that the craft should live. Yet it did. In wonder, and with great respect for the man behind him, Baxter saw the end of the rapids looming and a smoother rush of water beyond—

Then he saw something that brought a whoop of triumph to his lips.

On the smooth flow of river ahead

there was a canoe. It was maybe half a mile away. Baxter pointed eagerly, but the keen-eyed Farley had already seen. He yelled merrily. Then something hard nudged Baxter in the back and he turned. King Farley held a Sharpes carbine and offered it to him.

"When we get close enough, mebbe you can use it. I'll be kinda busy... there're more rapids up ahead, an' we'll be in 'em purty soon."

Baxter took the rifle, his short-lived triumph giving way to anxiety once more. If Joan Davenport was really in that canoe up front, he hated to think of her exposed to the dangers of the rapids.

The canoe ahead was headed for a bend in the river. Baxter hoped that he and Farley hadn't been seen. There was a good chance that they hadn't. There would be no reason for the enemy to look behind, after all. Just as the canoe vanished beyond the bend, Baxter thought that he could make out two persons in it. He couldn't be sure.

The giant King Farley really worked his paddle now, swirling the water past with all the savage strength of his shoulders and arms. The canoe cut the stream, its bow swaying from side to side in three-foot swings as Farley ladled the water. Baxter watched the river-bend looming closer. As they rounded it he scanned ahead. Soon he saw the enemy canoe. It was much closer and now he saw for certain that there were two occupants, the rear one paddling. Then he saw something else. The craft was nosing straight into a mad swirl of rapids more dangerous than the one Farley had just threaded.

Baxter went white as he saw the bubbling savagery of it. Behind, Farley yelled, "I wouldn't shoot this lot, not even for sport. But where one man can go, King Farley can go. Hang on, Baxter!"

THEY WERE frightening words. Ez Baxter cursed the man who had taken Joan into a danger which, normally, even King Farley would have avoided. There could only be one reason for it, he thought. The man ahead was now aware of his followers.

Soon he saw that he was right. As the canoe vanished into the boiling white of the rapids, Baxter saw a white face looking back at him. It was close enough now to be within rifle range, but of course Baxter didn't attempt to shoot. For one thing, he might hit the girl. For another, if Joan had to ride the rapids, let her at least ride them with a man who would do his best to get through. To kill her captor now was to kill Joan herself.

The rapids were rushing at them now, and Baxter saw the great masses of foam and fury looming ahead of the bow, as Farley drove straight for them. Then the high roar of crashing water filled his ears, and on all sides the crazy river buffeted and sucked at the canoe.

Baxter hung to the gunwales with both hands, the carbine gripped between his knees. The canoe bucked and rolled, sometimes twisting side-on to swirl at a blocking boulder before Farley, with superb skill and strength, righted it in the nick of time.

The other canoe couldn't be seen, of course. For the present, Baxter's world consisted of the canoe and a circle of cruel stone-and-water all around. Above the roar of it he heard the mighty voice of Farley cursing the savagery.

Water came aboard over a gunwale, soaking the gear. At ever bucking lurch of the craft Baxter felt sure it must overturn. But somehow the swearing strength of Farley remained in control. The canoe plunged in a boil of water and seemed about to shoot its nose under the surface. Next moment it bucked high and seemed to squeeze through close walls of rock—and then unexpectedly the water was calm and glassy once more, the current a lazily

flowing one spread wide and shallow between grassy banks.

"We're through!" Baxter yelled. "But...but where's that danged canoe?"

There was no sign of the enemy ahead. Baxter twisted to repeat the question—and there was no sign of Farley. Baxter swore. Farley must have gone overboard, in the last few feet of the rapids!

The paddle lay where it had fallen on the spruce floor of the canoe. Baxter scrambled back and tried to paddle his way out of the current. He was clumsy at it, but he got the canoe turned toward the left bank. All the time he scanned the river anxiously, but saw nothing of Farley or the other canoe.

He had a terrible dread that the other canoe had met disaster in the rapids and that Joan must have drowned, or been dashed to death. Sweating with a kind of helpless rage he nosed the canoe into the riverbank and jumped out. He hauled it high and dry—and at that moment a shot cracked across the river and hot lead spattered the mud at his feet.

Ez Baxter had time to grab the carbine and drop low behind the canoe before a second shot whipped close. Peering carefully, he saw the fading smoke of a rifle low on the far bank. among undergrowth.

Understanding nothing except that some one on the other bank was an enemy, he sent a shot at the undergrowth. It brought a hot reply which gouged deerskin from the canoe's high bow. Baxter fired a second shot right at that bunch of scrub and hoped he was bothering the unknown rifleman. Then, maybe a full minute later, the rifleman shot again.

Only—this time he didn't shoot at Baxter!

AT FIRST Baxter was nonplussed, hearing the crack of the rifle without the close whine of a slug. It happened once more. Then there was a mighty roar of rage from mid-river a little way upstream, and Baxter turned his head to take in the amazing scene.

King Farley was out there, and he had Joan Davenport! They had just drifted out of the rapids and Farley was supporting the girl with one giant arm while he swam for the bank with the other. And the unknown man across the stream was shooting at Farley and his burden!

Another shot spattered water close to Farley's head and the giant roared again. Baxter roared, too. Then he stood up in full view and put the carbine to his shoulder, deliberately drawing the fire as he crashed shot after shot at the unknown.

It worked. After Baxter's second shot a slug burned the sleeve of his shirt. Another holed his hat, and a third creased his thigh painfully. Yet he stood his ground, throwing shot for shot at the undergrowth across the stream, while Farley with his unconscious burden struggled nearer and nearer to the bank.

Then the enemy stopped shooting. Baxter watched but there was no movement over there. Farley came stumbling up the river bank with the Davenport girl limp in his arms. Baxter ran to help.

Blood from cuts on Farley's face mingled with the water that streamed from his wild beard and hair. He laid the unconscious girl on the grass. Her soaked clothes had been torn by the rapids, her blouse ripped to the waist. Farley went to his gear for brandy.

Ez Baxter, was frightened by the girl's white stillness. He probed beneath her torn blouse, feeling for life. Her breasts were warm under his hand, the skin smooth and soft, and soon he felt the beat of her heart. Farley brought the brandy.

"She fell outa that hombre's canoe. I saw her, back there in the rapids,

clingin' to a rock. I went over the side an' got to her jus' as she fainted. We kinda drifted outa the rapids, together."

Baxter looked at Farley and his heart was full of words he wanted to say but couldn't. Farley went on, "The guy must've beached his canoe on the other bank. He saw you come outa the rapids. He shot at you, huh? Then he saw me an' the gal an' shot at us. We wasn't a good target, I guess. Then you drew his fire, Baxter. An' judgin' by his silence now, you plumb put him outa business."

Farley went to his canoe, launched it, and went to investigate the other bank. With the brandy warming her, Joan came to and sat up, Baxter supporting her. Quickly she became aware of her torn clothes, gathering her blouse together and moaning, "This terrible place. Why did I ever leave Boston!"

Then memory returned. "I...I was in the river. Who got me out?"

"A good friend," Baxter said. "You'll meet him soon. But tell me...who kidnapped you?"

"A horried, squat little man. Larue, he said his name was. He told me everything. Renny paid him to kill me, frightened that I might try to reach Jim August with what I knew. Larue broke into the house to kill me and found that I'd gone. He guessed I would be making for Kuska. So he came after me, in a canoe."

"Yet he didn't kill you."

"No." She shuddered and flushed a little. "When he saw me...he changed his mind. Said he'd take me to a cabin of his...a few miles this side of Kuska, in the hills..."

"He's dead now," Baxter soothed. "Renny's dead, too. He was dead before Larue went to kill you, but Larue didn't know that. Wal...I guess I'll take you along to August's place, where you can sorta rest up an' recover, huh? You've been through a lot. After that ...I guess you'll be goin' east, huh?" He frowned in throught. "Boston, huh? Wonder if they play poker there."

Suddenly the girl screamed. She clung to Ez Baxter in fright, nodding her head at the wild-bearded Farley who was canoeing back across the river.

"That man! That terrible man, he's after me again! Protect me, Ez, protect me...."

Baxter pulled her close and kissed her, and promised to protect her.

★

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An "If" Story

by HAROLD GLUCK

THE STORY of the American West is made up of many dramatic episodes, which have been told and retold both in fact and fiction. Perhaps you have wondered as I have, whether things might have been different IF events turned out the other way.

Suppose Billy-the-Kid had killed Pat Garrett instead of being on the losing end of a sixgun? Would it have really made much difference in the history of the West? The answer to that is probably NO, for Billy-the-Kid would have sooner or later been killed by somebody else.

Suppose the Mexicans defeated General Houston, and even won the war of 1846? Would that have made a difference in the history of the West? The chances are it would have changed the destiny of our country.

Suppose Kit Carson never had met Fremont, would that have been very important? Fremont would have used another mountain man and trapper as his guide. Probably Kit Carson would have continued being a good man, but not famous; still the effect on the West would have been nil.

This is an IF story; it is made up of fact and fiction. Read it and enjoy it, but see if you can put your finger on the incident where the IF begins. For at that second, when the IF happens, history is changed in an entirely different direction. You may not agree with the IF results. We readily admit that the IF possibilities can be more than one, and virtually unlimited. But don't worry, for now our story begins . . .

MY NAME is George Wilkins Kendall. Originally I was a native of Vernon, New Hampshire. At an early age I became a printer, and like others of my craft, found employment in different cities. In the year 1833, while in New York City, the dreaded cholera broke out. In those days, if you were still strong and healthy, you packed up your possessions and fled to another place; that was the best way to remain alive.

There was a ship ready to sail to New Orleans; I boarded her and thus landed in that famous port of the south,

where I found employment in the composing room of the *True American.* They must have been very well satisfied with my work because two years later I became the foreman.

However, during that time, I toyed with the idea of founding a daily paper, modeled upon the policies which were winning contemporary success and fame for the *Sun* in New York and the *Ledger* in Philadelphia. Finally I decided to make the break; I took into partnership, a trusted friend and fellow employee on the *True American,* by name of Francis A. Lumsden. Thus in January, 1837, we both launched the New Orleans *Picayune.*

I was only twenty eight at this time, and had limited resources; but the paper soon became famous under my guidance. Within the short space of four years, I found myself known throughout the country; and what was equally important, there was money in my purse. But I was restless. I wanted to travel and I wanted adventure. Call it the reporter blood in my veins.

Meanwhile there were strange rumors about the activities of President Mirabeau B. Lamar, of the Republic of Texas. He was a native of Georgia and a journalist, and had removed to Texas in 1835, where he had taken an active and prominent part in the Texan Revolution. He was ambitious and perhaps visionary. His purchasing agent was in New Orleans to acquire supplies and arms for a proposed Santa Fe Expedition. Permit me to give you a background of the situation.

The average present-day American finds it difficult to realize the extent to which, in an earlier century, Spain held dominion within the present boarders of the United States. From the Peace of Paris, of 1763, Spain owned all our territory lying west of the Mississippi. Eastward of the Mississippi, she controlled all of the Gulf Coast to and including the peninsula of Forida. At the close of the American Revolution, diplomats of the young country were animated by a lively fear lest the region between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi be added to that of Spain.

But the power of Spain declined, and Mexico fought for its independence from the mother country. The settlers of Texas—chiefly of American origin—won their independence from Mexico, and established the Lone Star Republic. In doing so, the Texans had as their boundary the Rio Grande to its source, and thence by a due north line to the Forty-second parallel.

This boundary, if established, would have embraced within its limits a large part of the Mexican province of New Mexico, including the capital of the province, Santa Fe. This was one of the most ancient provinces of New Spain; it was separated from the settled portion of Texas by almost a thousand miles of wilderness, over which the fierce Kiowa, Comanche, and other plains tribes roamed at will.

THERE WERE those who said that this claim set up by the Texan government was merely an assertion to be traded upon for such advantage as it might be made to bring. There were others who said that the Texan government was waiting for the right time to enforce its claim, if necessary by the use of arms.

The New Mexicans were believed to be sorely dissatisfied with their existing government, and ripe for revolution. If they could be induced to make common cause with the Texans in their conflict with the Mexican government, they would be a good ally. There were those in New Orleans who said the proposed Sante Fe expedition was merely for the purpose of trading goods; others claimed it was to be purely an armed expedition, to help the inhabitants of New Mexico throw off the yoke.

One thing was certain: They were

taking volunteers who would go on this journey. I was debating what to do when an invitation came to me, on behalf of the Texan government, to join the expedition as their guest. Here was a chance to gather material for articles and even a book, to travel, and to taste adventure. So in all haste, I accepted the invitation.

The expedition was to leave Austin, the capital of Texas, about the last of May or the first of June. The route to be taken had not been determined when Major Howard was in New Orleans, but it was thought that the group would follow up the San Saba road, from San Antonio to Santa Fe. This was a route extending in nearly a northwest, and—as was then thought—a direct line. Fearing that there might be a scarcity of water, the direction was later changed.

I took the boat from New Orleans to Galveston; there I found everyone talking about the proposed Sante Fe expedition. It was looked upon as nothing more than a pleasant hunting excursion through a large section of country, much of which was unknown to the white man. Such portions of the route as had been previously explored were known to abound with buffalo, bear, elk, antelope, and every species of game, besides fish and wild honey.

Here I met young Frank Combs, son of General Leslie Combs, of Kentucky. The young man had made up his mind to join the expedition, in the hope of improving his defective hearing.

"I understand you are leaving this evening," he told me, "for Houston on your way to Austin. May I join you?"

My answer was in the affirmative and the next morning we landed safely in Houston. Every gunsmith in the place was occupied night and day in repairing guns and pistols. Every saddler was at work manufacturing bullet-pouches and mending the saddles and bridles of the volunteers. I had brought with me my own rifle, purchased from the well known Dickinson, of Louisville, Kentucky. In addition, I had my pistols, powder, lead, bowie, other knives, blankets—in fact everything except a horse.

"You wish to purchase a horse, No?" was the way many would-be sellers greeted me. I had no horse, hence I needed one; that was the way they figured. I examined several horses and finally bought one with the name of "Jim the Butcher."

Frank Combs and myself, with one or two others also on their way to Austin, left Houston late in the afternoon. The weather was hot and sultry. There was a shower and we stayed at a place made out of logs; we passed a comfortable and dry night.

We continued on our way. Arriving at Austin, I was introduced to Colonel William G. Cooke and Doctor R. F. Breham, two of the commisioners appointed by General Lamar to treat with the inhabitants of New Mexico They informed me that the expedition would not leave under a week, at least—probably not under ten or twelve days. This delay I did not much regret as it would give me an opportunity of visiting places.

Frank Combs went with me to San Antonio. I had a delightful time and returned to Austin. The evening after my return to Austin however, an accident occured which not only came near preventing me from leaving for Santa Fe, but for any other places in this, the lower world. I went walking—and fell. Simple as that! My back was injured, and my ankle shattered; I was taken to the hotel and Dr. Breham fixed me up.

THE DAY succeeding my unfortunate accident, I was visited by crowds of friends, among whom was the President, General Lamar. The only topics discussed had some relation to the expedition. Preparations were going on in every quarter. The merchants were packing their goods, and mending

and strengthening the heavy wagons upon which they were to be transported. Volunteers were cleaning and preparing their arms, as we were to enter an Indian and buffalo range almost immediately.

Every one was anticipating an exciting and glorious frolic, with the wild gossiping tales of old hunters and campaigners tending to increase the fever of impatience to be upon the road. Not a word was said about the hardships, dangers, and difficulties that might take place. As to our reception on reaching Santa Fe, but little was said. The universal impression in Texas was that the inhabitants of Santa Fe were anxious to throw off a yoke which was galling to them, and rally under the lone star banner.

While lying in bed, I received from Mr. Roberts, then acting Secretary of State—a letter written at the request of General Lamar—inviting me to join the expedition as a guest. I was to be subject to no control, civil or military; I was free to remain with the expedition so long as it suited my convenience.

The 18th of June arrived and with it the time for the departure of the group. A few of my friends endeavored to dissuade me from going. "I will go it if I lose a leg," is a common, yet not very classical, remark among a certain class of Western men, when they have fully made up their minds to do a thing. I made that remark also.

The main body of the expedition had been lying encamped for some time on the Brushy, a small stream about twenty miles from Austin. As far as this point, General Lamar accompanied the last party. I was assisted into a wagon on leaving. It was late in the afternoon when we reached camp, a beautiful and romantic situation on the Brushy, near several large springs of cool and most delicious water.

Many of the volunteers had been stationed at this place three or four weeks, and had become impatient of delay. Now that it was certain that they were soon to be on the move to Santa Fe, all was joy, activity, and life. Two days were now passed on the brush in reloading the wagons, and making the necessary arrangements for the long journey ahead of us.

ON THAT fateful morning, the expedition finally took up the line of march from the fertile valley and cool springs of the Brushy. Two companies, numbering some eighty men, were detailed to go forward as an advanced guard. Then came the wagons in single file, and the beef cattle that were to furnish us with meat. One company was also detailed for fatigue duty—driving the cattle and cutting away the banks of creeks, or removing any obstacles that might obstruct the passage of wagons. The rear-guard brought up the long procession and consisted of three companies, there being six in all.

These companies were commanded by Captains Caldwell, Sutton, Houghton, hudson, Strain, and Lewis. The latter commanded the artillery company, which had one brass six-pounder. The number of volunteers doing duty was two hundred and seventy; in addition, there were about fifty persons attached to the expedition in some way, being General McLeod and his staff, the commissioners, merchants, tourists, and servants.

The long train of wagons moving heavily forward, with the different companies of volunteers—all well mounted and well armed, and riding in double file—presented an animating spectacle. It caused every heart to beat high with the anticipation of exciting events. And they were right, at that!

At night, we reached our camping grounds on the San Gabriel. Some of our party, who were first in, amused themselves by fishing and shooting alligators. On the arrival of the beef cattle, one of them was selected, shot and

dressed. Then followed the cooking and eating of both dinner and supper. We had made no stop during the day, which necessarily brought both meals together and good appetites to do them justice.

Our fare was simple enough: Roasted or broiled beef, cooked on sticks or ramrods before the fire, with salt, coffee, and sugar. No breadstuffs were provided, unless a small quantity of rice can be dignified with that title. Our meal over, knots of the volunteers would congregate here and there, around camp fires, telling stories of the border forays, buffalo hunts, and brushes with the Indians of the prairies. Then we went to sleep.

As the days were now extremely warm, early morning starts were recommended and adopted. At daybreak we were awakened by the cheerful notes of the reveille. We made twelve miles that day and encamped on Opossum Creek, as there was no water within several miles. In the night we were visited by a tremendous storm of thunder, lightning, and wind.

Our next day's travel carried us across rolling prairies, not a tree being in sight in any direction. Here and there, in the distance, small gangs of buffaloes could be seen scampering off. Several of the huge animals were run down and killed during the day. I made a meal of buffalo meat. The stories that night in camp were all in relation to buffalo, the abundance of "sign" in the shape of tracks and places where the grass had been eaten close, plainly denoting that we were in the vicinity of a large herd.

The next day we continued on our way and ran into a large buffalo herd. Unable to mount a horse, I could not join the exciting chase. We killed twenty eight and took twelve young calves. In the afternoon we reached Little River, where we camped for the night. We had a feast of choice buffalo meat, tongue, and also the marrow bones of that animal. At sundown, a drove of mustangs—or wild horses of the prairie—paid us a flying visit.

ON THE first of July we reached Cow Creek, killing large numbers of buffalo during the day. The 2nd, we halted to repair some of the wagons which had been upset and injured. Many of the gullies and creeks we were compelled to cross were impassable, until much time had been spent in cutting and digging away the steep and lofty banks.

Our route from Cow Creek led us over high and dry prairies and after traveling some twenty miles—a long distance for wagons—we were finally obliged to encamp without water. The day had been insupportably hot, without a cloud or hardly a breath of air stirring. All the water in our canteens was consumed before noon; we suffered extremely that night.

Very frequently on the great prairies, a man wakes up in the morning and finds that he has had a rattlesnake for a sleeping partner. But there is one excellent trait in the character of these reptiles: They never bite unless disturbed, and will get out of the way as soon as possible. In addition to the rattlesnake, the tarantula is frequently met with on the Texan prairies. They are large, black, venomous-looking insects.

The early part of the 6th of July was spent in cutting a road through the thick belt of wood which skirts either side of the main branch of the Bosque. The labor of crossing the river was incredible. In descending the abrupt banks which led to the channels, it was necessary not only to lock the wheels but to hold back the wagons with ropes to prevent them from pitching down. The ascent was nearly perpendicular and some forty feet high, with not better footing than deep sand. Some twenty yoke of oxen would be hitched to a wagon; then ropes would be attached, wherever there was a

place to make them fast, manned by about fifty or sixty of the fatigue party.

Finally, all the drivers would be called in requation and when all was ready for a start such a jumping, whipping,, cracking, yelling, pulling, and cursing and swearing would arise as to set all description in defiance. Yet, difficult as it was, we made it. Later we camped in a rich and beautiful valley through which Cedral Creek meandered. Some of the wagons needing repair, it was resolved to remain here until General McLeod should arrive, and with him additional cattle for our subsistence. On the afternoon of the 8th, we were overjoyed to see him and his party arrive. The object of Mr. Howland, our guide, was to cross the Brazos at the hearest practicable point.

After traveling some sixteen miles on the 9th, we were fortunate in reaching a small spring of water. Our progress had been considerably impeded and made devious and tiresome by deep gullies and runs. Our route on the 11th of July, was along a chain of rough hills which separate the valley of the Brazos from the prairies. During the day, several wagons were in some way broken and injured. We made camp when we reached a spot with good pasturage for our jaded horses and oxen. Repairs were made on the wagons and on the 14th we again continued on our way.

A WORD about our spy company. Their duties were to keep one day in advance of the main body, for the purpose of picking out the best road for the wagons, finding water, and keeping a lookout for Indians. It was in charge of Captain Caldwell, an old backwoodsman, who had been engaged in many conflicts with Mexicans and Indians. He was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence of Texas. A report came in that a large party of Cherokees and Caddoes had planted themselves in a large bend of the Brazos, above Camanche Peak.

At first, it was determined to go out of our way and attack them. We changed this plan, and at night strict orders were given to the guard to be on the alert to prevent a surprise, or our horses and oxen from being stampeded and driven off. The next day our journey was through an area known as Cross Timbers. Bear and deer are found in the vicinity, and small gangs of buffalo take shelter here when scattered and driven from the prairies by Indians. In many of the trees, swarms of wild bees are found, thus affording us the luxury of honey. For two or three days we journeyed through the middle of the belt trying to find a way out. On one or two occasions, distant fires were seen upon the hills at night; but we were unable to get a sight of the Indians who were encamped by them.

Finally, on the night of the 23rd, we reached Noland's River. As many of our oxen were much travel-worn, and some of our horses needed shoeing, we encamped upon this stream until the 26th. The officers of the expedition held a consultation to devise means for more rapid progress.

The first thing we did was to throw away a large portion of the dried beef we had brought from Austin, much of which was found to be spoiled. Next, we decided to leave behind our greatest comfort—our tents. But one we took with us, the hospital tent. Then we continued on our way. For the first time, our latitude and longitude were taken by a gentleman who had been an officer in the English navy and understood the use of the quadrant. In the evening, the spies returned and told us they had found a route through the timber in a northwesterly direction. The road we took, and it grew worse and worse as we travelled on it. The ground was covered with a heavy undergrowth of briers and thorn-bushes.

It was also stumpy and stony, and cut up every two or three hundred yards by deep gullies. Night finally overtook us. The drivers were worn down, hungry and thirsty, and dispirited. Several wagons had been upset, broken to pieces, and left on the roadside. We rested and then came morning with unpleasant news for us. Our mules had broken their fastenings and started off, probably in search of water. We went after them, and then were able to continue on our way.

FINALLY we did get out of Cross Timbers and crossed the great trail made the year before by the Chihuahua traders. Then we found ourselves upon a "burn", or place where the prairie grass had been lately consumed by fire. During the day we also noticed fresh Indian "sign". Captain Caldwell and his men met some Indians who told him they were members of the Wacoes. They made no attempt to attack us. Why? They had seen our six-pounder, and were afraid of a cannon.

But we did have a terrifying experience. We were making camp at the edge of a stream; suddenly came the report of a cannon and a dark smoke was seen to arise.

"An Indian attack!" was the startling cry on all sides, and at once we commenced huddling on our clothes and bridling our horses. We set off for what we supposed to be the scene of the conflict; but as we traveled we realized that the prairie was on fire in all directions. The flames were going at a fast rate, and our only hope of survival was to outrun those flames and get to a higher level of ground.

The sky became lighted with a radiance even more lustrous and dazzling than that of the noonday sun. One of our companions found a passageway up a steep hill, and we were saved. But daylight of the next morning disclosed a melancholy scene of desolation and destruction. North, south, and east, as far as the eye could reach, the country was blackened by the fire. Some of our wagons had been completely destroyed; at one time, the ammunition wagon was on fire, but it was saved by the heroic work of our men. This I will say: A bullet has considerable virtue in relieving thirst, and a piece of raw hide imparts much moisture to the mouth, as I have proved by sad experience.

Our food supply ran low. However, a party went out hunting and returned with deer and antelope; so we ate well. The next few nights produced a mystery: Our horses and mules began to vanish. Somehow, the Indians were getting through in spite of our vigilant guards. Captain Strain went out with a party of twenty five men to find and bring in some of the Indians, and find out what their intentions were towards us. Lieutenant Hull was with him; they made camp.

Lieutenant Hull went out with five men to get water. They never returned; their bodies were found, stripped, scalped, and horribly mutilated. This was the work of the Cayguas and we sent a party out to find and attack them, but no contact was made with these redskins. Graves were dug and we laid to rest those valiant comrades of ours. Our journey continued.

We found no game to shoot, and our food supply began to get lower and lower. We measured our rations carefully, but the day came when we had no more food. We were hungry. What do hungry men eat? We eyed a horse carefully; it was a broken down animal and finally we shot it. The meat was as tough as India-rubber, but we were starved. Then came the glad news: Some of our party contacted some Mexican shepherds; they returned with sheep. We were near San Miguel. We feasted, and many made themselves sick by overeating.

It was now determined by our principal officers to send two men directly into the town to confer with the au-

thorities. W. P. Lewis, captain of the artillery company, and George Van Ness, secretary of the commissioners were detailed for this service. Both could speak spanish. They returned with disquieting infomation; the inhabitants had been told by General Armijo that it was our intention to burn, slay, and destroy as we went.

AN HOUR later, the notorious Dimasio Salezar reached our camp. With him were a hundred roughly dressed but well mounted soldiers, armed with lances, swords, bows and arrows, and miserable escopetas, or old fashioned carbines. He immediately demanded an interview with our leaders, and I was present when he spoke. I should mention that by this time my foot was practically healed.

"Amigos," he began "I am certain you are here only for friendly reasons. As you know the law of Mexico, you must have permits in order to do business with our people. I shall assume that you do not have these permits, but do not worry; they will probably be issued to you. Since you are here only for friendly reasons, there can be no valid reason for the carrying of firearms.

If you feel you need protection upon the soil of Mexico, I shall assign guards to you, since you do have valuables. You will deliver to me all of your guns, pistols, and supplies. These will be kept in a warehouse, with the names of the owners. When you return to Texas and cross the border, then they will be returned to you."

A conference was held by our officers and attended by the leading merchants. The view of the merchants was to agree with the demand of Salezar; our officers felt we should be permitted to keep our pistols. Frank Combs asked me to go aside so he and some of the other young men could speak to me.

"I think they are afraid of us. We have superior arms and could hold off an army. You aren't bound by any agreement; you speak to Salezar and see what will happen."

I returned to the conference and faced Salezar. By this time a group of young men, with arms ready were in back of me.

"You surrender to us at once," I said, "or we shall wipe out every person in town. Take one look at our guns. You have three minutes in which to decide; lay down your arms and we shall treat you generously."

Salezar didn't have at that time the slightest idea of who I was, but he could sense I meant what I said.

"We will surrender," he said, "but in the new government, I want my same position. I can be of much service to you, help you with the people. We shall go to Santa Fe."

Before it dawned on the officers and traders what had happened, Salezar's men began to lay down their arms. W. P. Lewis came up to me and spoke.

"You certainly have put us in a fine position! But I guess this is what President Lamar wanted. We can't go back now; we must go on. I'll take care of the traders."

Our entry into Santa Fe was a joyous one. Salezar spoke to the leading inhabitants; they joined in the movement. Our forces were augmented by volunteers. Between us and Mexico City stood General Armijo and his army. We never knew exactly what deal Salezar promised his friend. They, too, joined us and we became known as the "Revolucionistos."

A month later, we were in complete possession of Mexico City and the country. President Lamar and his cabinet joined us.

He spoke to me alone. "Texas fights for her independence from Mexico. Now we are joined again; we shall see the torch of liberty is never extinguished. It will be a difficult task to blend all of us together. Had you not spoken, the arms would have been sur-

rendered, and histroy might have been different."

A half century has elapsed, and I am now retired from all political life. True, the leaders of Texana visit me for advice on important matters. We are completely at peace with the United States of America, and there are no fortifications on our boundary. In 1854 it was agreed to forbid the bringing of any slaves into our territory; A fund was set up to purchase and free all slaves. I am glad to say that the southern states of the United States of America followed our example. We have railroads, factories, many industries, and the best methods in agriculture and cattle raising. My eyes are getting dim, but they always see the flag of Texana, and long may she wave!

Question: Where did the *IF* take place? *(The answer is on page 98)*

ALFALFA DAN

by Edward Garner

Alfalfa Dan was a chawing man,
A man who admired to chaw,
And he found the peace of a sweet release
With a big cud in his jaw.
He like the boon of *Two Steers* saloon,
And there, at a table, he
Sat through the days in a happy haze,
A curious sight to see.

It is not denied that Dan took pride
In the accuracy of his aim,
For he could loose a squirt of juice
That would put a gun to shame.

He heard a buzz as sometimes one does,
And a fly forty feet away
Was sent to roam in its long home
In a shroud of ambeer spray!

Dan had no use for a cuspidor
In a near and covenient spot,
He liked it far, at the end of the bar,
He liked the long distance shot!
And men would see, and would agree
That one with an aim so true
Should have his name in the Hall of Fame,
As his just and honest due.

Barkeeper Kent thought Alfalfa lent
A touch that was not high-toned,
And often tried to get Dan outside,
But he failed, and he sighed and groaned.
"Just let me stay," Alfalfa'd say,
"And one of these days you'll know
That a chawing man named Alfalfa Dan
Will make some fine blessings flow."

The barkeep felt no honor dwelt
In force-induced exodus,
So he let Dan stay in the same old way,
While he learned new ways to cuss;
For Dan's slow curves got on his nerves,
And his fast ones were like bullets that
Hit the cuspidor with the din of war
From the chair where Alfalfa spat.

At closing time one night the sight
Of two bandits caught Dan's eye,
Their guns were drawn and their sights were on
The barkeep, who wished to fly.
"We'll take the cash," they said, and rash,
They began to rob the till,
The barkeep sighed and nearly died,
He looked as though deathly ill!

Alfalfa Dan took time to scan
The scene of his campaign,
And then he spat in a rat-a-tat
Barrage that fell like rain.
The bandits turned, for their eyes were burned
With the "sun-cured" Alfalfa'd sent,
And they tied to flee, but they could not see
Through the pain of their sharp torment.
Alfalfa sent Barkeeper Kent
To go get the sheriff then,
While he stood guard on the two- ill-starred
And crestfallen holdup-men...
Now two bandits sleep where night's shadows creep
Past two graves that were filled at noon,
And Alfalfa Dan, who's a chawing man,
Chaws on in *Two Steers* saloon.

★

"It's natural for a fellow to want to gun down the man who killed his father—especially when he's following his Paw's footsteps in upholding the honest enforcement of the law. But a lawman's got to be better than natural..."

BETTER THAN NATURAL

by KENNETH GANZ

A SOUR, BITTER craving for violence welled coldly in John Ladd and drove him. Remote from every sight but the hated features of Tracey Folsom, he closed Old Doc's door on his father's body and started down the walk, his bootsteps hollow on the planking.

The moustache—the curling black hair—the woman-seeking eyes! His fingers twitched.

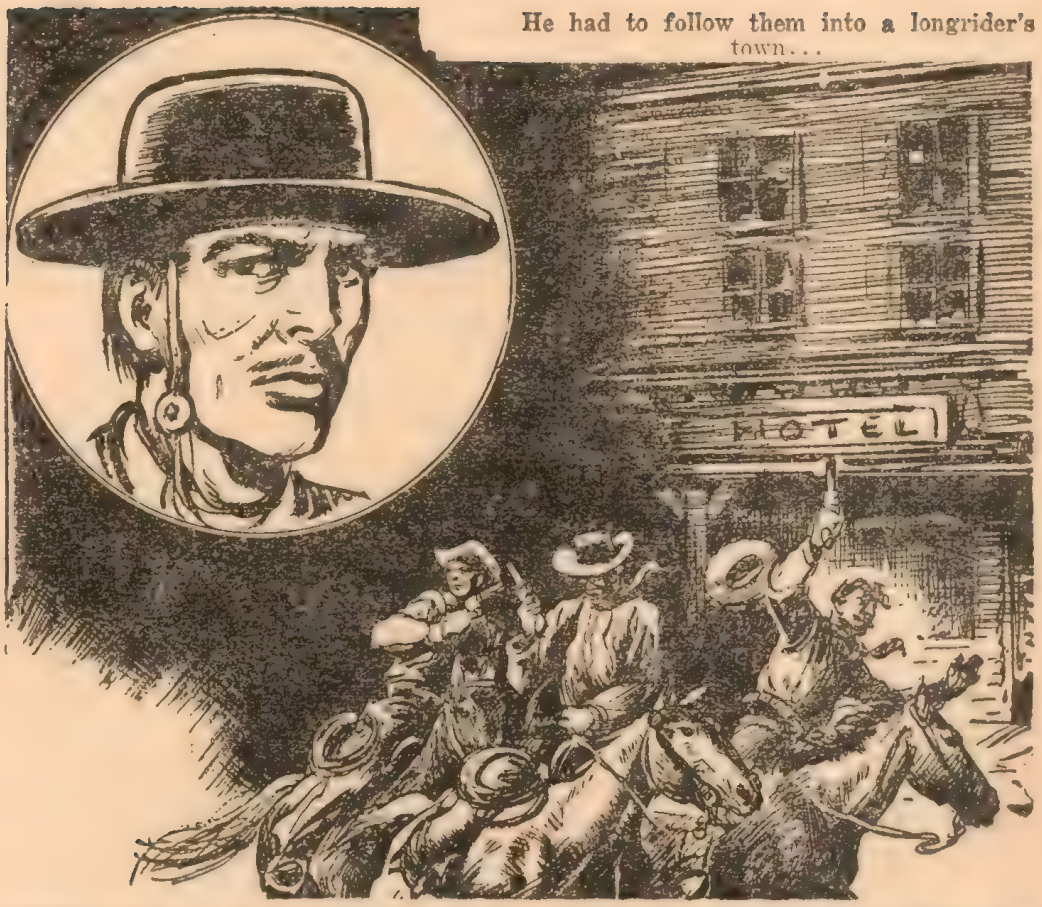
He stepped out away from the false-front buildings and planted his feet in the dust of Two Springs' street, dumbly beholding the buckboard that swerved around him. Now he was counting the horses tied before the saloon, vacantly studying the empty stage waiting in front of the Wells Fargo office to load for Phoenix, beginning to sweat under the mounting July sun that fired the deputy's badge on his homespun shirt.

He was big, and solid for twenty-one; when he began to march toward the sheriff's office, his stride puffed out little clouds of dust that matched the eyes under the campaign hat he wore. He plodded down the middle of the street, past the livery stable and the blacksmith's shop, until he came to the adobe lock-up with barred windows at the rear.

Sheriff West swiveled around from his desk. "Son, I reckon I don't have to tell you I'm all cut to pieces about your Paw." His eyes shifted to Ladd's rigid jaw line. "I reckon everybody in town feels about the same."

Ladd was at the gun rack. He reached down his gunbelt and buckled it on. Then he lifted a Winchester out of its slot.

The sheriff swung his creaking chair further around. "I just rode in from



He had to follow them into a longrider's town...

Folsom ranch. Tracey ain't there; he's lit out."

Ladd found a box of rifle cartridges and stuffed it into his pocket. "I got a horse." He looked into the distance, past the sheriff.

The sherif nodded. 'You're a good tracker and right handy with a gun. None better than your Paw, and him teaching you since you could walk. Be written in the history books someday, how he cleaned up Two Springs."

"Lot of good it does him now."

"Didn't cotten to gunslinging justice."

Ladd started for the door.

"Didn't hold for a lawman shooting, 'cept he was pulled on. He locked them up and put'em on trial. Killing wasn't his way."

Ladd stopped and cursed Tracey Folsom. "It's my way now."

The sheriff nodded again. "That's natural. But a good lawman's got to do better'n natural. I was mighty proud when your Paw handed over his job to me, 'count of him getting down in the back, and I know he was mighty proud when I pinned a deputy's badge on you. 'Course Abner Ladd set a hard example."

"I'm making my own example out of Tracey Folsom," Ladd said flatly.

The sheriff got his hard bulk out of the chair. "I got to say something you don't like to hear, but Tracey claimed your Paw went for his gun first. It wasn't right for Tracey to say what he did about you and the girl, 'specially in a drinking place; but if he was drawed on, the law don't call it murder to shoot first."

"If Paw went for his gun, no Tracey Folsom was going to get a shot in first."

The sheriff scratched the bristles on his chin. "Maybe not, but I figure him for mighty fast. What I don't figure is

for your Paw to draw first at all. Anybody here knows better than that, and it looks mighty bad for Tracey when he's catched. But it takes a jury trial to decide what's murder; it ain't the sheriff's job, or his deputy's. Your job's to bring Tracey in for trial." He put his big hand on Ladd's shoulder. "A peace officer can't go lookin' for a killing."

Ladd pulled away. He unpinned his badge and threw it on the desk. "That suit you better?"

"John!" The sheriff called after him sharply and went to stand on the sill. "You're throwin' a heap away."

Ladd turned on him, the sun glinting across the flat planes of his face.

"You hunt down Tracey and kill him—that *is* murder. I'll have to come after you."

"I'll be looking for you, too."

The sheriff's voice tightened. "Take it slow and easy with Tracey. I figure he's mighty handy with a sixgun."

LADD SWUNG away and made up the dusty street for Zed Hopkins' livery stable. He could see his roan gelding standing outside, saddled and waiting.

Zed came out into the sun. "Thought you might be wanting him. He spat into the hot dust. "Old Doc's took the buckboard to his office."

Ladd nodded. He loosened the roan's hitch and led it through the street towards the apothecary. When he came up to the buckboard tied to the rail in front of Old Doc's, he dropped the gelding's reins into the dust and stepped up on the plank walk.

Old Doc came outside, as if he had heard a knock on his door. "Everything's ready," he said. In spite of the heat he had on his faded black frock coat, and his white chin whiskers bobbed above a collar and satin bow. "I'll go get Ed and his brother."

Ladd said, "No. We'll manage."

They carried out the pine coffin between them and slid it on the buckboard. Old Doc went back inside and came out with a Bible. He climbed up on the driver's seat and looked at Ladd. "You going to ride your horse?"

Ladd took up the gelding's reins. "No."

Old Doc opened his mouth, but he looked away instead of saying anything and slapped the horses with the lines. Ladd followed the buckboard on foot, leading his horse, not looking at the men who removed their hats as the procession passed. A few oldtimers fell in behind and followed out of Two Springs to the burying ground on the hill.

The grave had been dug. Ladd nodded his thanks to Joe Spears, who waited, leaning on his shovel. Men came forward quickly and lowered the coffin into its resting place. Old Doc took his Bible and without opening the book read the Twenty-third Psalm.

After the last words Ladd thrust out and took the shovel from Joe Spears and filled in the grave. He took the rough cross that bore his father's name, and last night's date, and thrust it deep at the head and pounded it down with the shovel. When he straightened up, he looked each man in the eye, around the small circle. "I thank you for paying your respects," he said.

"He was a fine man," Old Doc said.

Ladd swung up into his saddle and rode off, heading away from town.

It was past noon when he came up on Folsom range. He swung out from the row of foothills that skirted his straight-line route and kept beyond shot of their draws and defiles. By the time the sun was half down he could see the trees of Summer Run pointing out from the hills across the scorched range. He was within two miles of the branch-water bend that nested the Folsom ranch houses. Off to his left was a scattering of Folsom steers.

A small dust grew out of the distance ahead and bore toward him. One

—two riders, he decided. He hunched his shoulders and sat his horse.

One rider. At fifty yards she checked—rearing. Then she broke out and came on, the horse half trotting and dancing sideways a time or two, until she came to him.

"Martha," he said.

She edged the horse in front of him, her clear young face set with trouble. "I'm sorry, John. It was a wicked, sinful thing to happen."

Ladd jerked the gelding's head away.

She pushed her horse up quickly, close at his side. "Wait!"

"No!" He felt her urgency press him, and his anger swelled harshly, even against her. "No!" he shouted.

"They'll kill you, too; they're waiting for you."

His laugh slapped her.

In anguish she repeated, "They'll kill you too. Please don't go there!"

"You afraid for him or for me?"

She stared at him. "It is your hate and your wild anger and your sorrow over your father that makes you say that to me, John." The words caught in her throat. "You know where I have a mind to be. Did I not tell you last night? And the night before?"

"You told me you were going to marry Tracey Folsom."

"I did not tell you that in his house was where I had a mind to be!"

HIS TENSION was running through the reins, startling the gelding. It pranced impatiently. "Hathaway Folsom be damned! So out of charity he raised an orphan. He can't make you marry a dead man."

"I am like a daughter to him. He loves me as well as his own son. He wants me to marry his boy and never leave Folsom. Oh, it's more impossible now than ever!" she cried. "Now you kill Tracey and you will put the fence higher than ever between you and me."

He thought on the hated name, hating her now and everything tainted by the name.

She blanched at the revelation on his face and looked wildly away. Her horse pulled the slackened reins forward and dropped its head to crop at the grazing grass. Then she crumpled and cried out, "John, go back to Two Springs and I'll leave Folsom before night, and come to you. We'll go away and begin again, with no Folsom blood upon us."

"Martha," he spoke more gently. "I believe you; I know you have to put it that way. But here is the way it has to be. I'm going after Tracey Folsom; then I'm coming back and take you away from Hathaway Folsom and everything else that's damned with the name. That's the way I have to do it."

Her anger rose quickly to match his. "You'll never come back; they'll trap you. You're a hating man, John. You can't see that killing leads to killing and I'm between you and the Folsoms. You kill Tracey, then you have to kill Father, or he will have to kill you. Either way, you are lost to me. Hathaway Folsom is the only father I ever had. I love him. As much as I love you."

She raised her whip. "You kill Hathaway Folsom, and I'll have to hate you. If he kills you, I'll hate him. You're the only one who can save us. Let the law deal with Tracey." She drove the whip down hard, and the frightened horse leaped away with her.

Ladd's hate flared. He pointed the gelding towards Folsom and put it into a hard run that left Martha's light pony behind.

When he came up to the corral, he pulled down to a walk and rounded the rail, seeing the Folsom house before him. His arms and his legs and his whole body lifted with power. He burned with sound and light that narrowed down to the house porch, where Hathaway Folsom sat and pointed his white mustache at him, a rifle across

his knees. The two Folsom hands in the corral stood stiff legged, their heads turning slowly along Ladd's approach to the man who waited.

At fifty feet the rifle lifted and pointed, loosely held, at Ladd's shirt. At thirty feet he halted and swung out of the saddle.

Hathaway Folsom said, "That'll be close enough."

Ladd said, "Tracey. Hiding behind an old man?" He dropped the gelding's lines into the dust and started forward.

The rifle came alive, no longer loosely held. "I meant it," Hathaway Folsom said. "You ain't coming more than another step or two."

Ladd saw the old man's finger take up the slack on the trigger. He stood quite still, ready to throw himself to the side and draw. The old man had only one shot. There would be no time for him to lever the rifle if he could be made to miss.

Folsom said, "It won't work. I ain't firing until after you start your move; then you ain't going to finish it."

THE DRUMMING of a horse on the hard soil swelled up around them. Neither man shifted his eyes from the other. Then the sound was gone, and Martha flung herself between them. "No!" she shouted.

Folsom said, "I'll thank you to go inside, Martha."

"I won't!" she cried out. "I won't do it!" She ran swiftly to Ladd. Before he thought to move away, she had her arms around his body. When she felt his muscles tense to thrust her off, she gasped frantically, "No! No! No!"

Ladd said, "You picked your side?"

"I love him!" she sobbed. "Can't you understand? I love him. Like you loved your own father!"

For a long minute Ladd looked down at the tears in her upturned eyes. "Appeared to me he had a rifle down on me. You afraid he might miss?"

He felt the tremor run through her. "Do you think he would shoot me in the back to kill you?"

"All right, Martha," Ladd said. "You can go up on the porch with the Folsoms; I won't fight the old man."

Folsom put down the rifle and got on his feet. "Come here, girl," he said gently. Ladd heard pride in his voice. "I didn't want to have to kill you, boy," he went on. "I ain't saying that if Abner Ladd and Tracey had to fight, that I'm not glad it was him instead of Tracey. I ain't saying I ever like your hanging around Martha, though I let her make up her mind for herself. I am saying I feel for a boy that's lost his Paw, and I ain't wanting to fight him for no other reason than he's grieving."

"I ain't quite so tenderhearted."

Ladd threw Martha off and swung around. Folsom's foreman stood facing him, alertness boring out of his eyes. He was gun ready. The two Folsom hands lagged carefully at one side, watching their awareness of a fight.

Buck Tambling was a big man, with a name for a killing or two down Six-shot way before he came to Folsom. Ladd knew him for a slow drinker who sat with Tracey Folsom at a corner table, away from his riders.

Tambling rubbed his dusty whiskers with a whole hand and spat into the dust before him. "We ain't looking for no company here. Least of all yours." He spat again. "Now git, boy. Mr. Folsom don't want no trouble on Folsom, and I ain't having none. Git for home."

It was fight. Ladd surged with hot relief. One, two, or three—there was no caution in him. He narrowed down on the man who baited him, waiting for his move.

The hands shuffled further away. Dimly Ladd heard Martha saying something. Hathaway Folsom spoke out, "Tambling, let the boy go in peace."

Buck Tambling held his grey stare. "Mr. Folsom, I aims to do just that. But I aims to chaw me him up right

here, else he puts his tail between his legs and gits for town. Tomorrow I aims to go to town after him and chaw me him up there, else he keeps on running and gits for the next county. You about ready to git, boy? Or that sixgun of yourn loaded?" His arm twitched.

Ladd's gun leaped level on a shirt button. As he squeezed off the shot, he suddenly pushed the muzzle over an inch and took Tambling in the gun shoulder. The heavy slug drove the man back down into the dust, his drawn pistol spinning over him.

Ladd threw down on the two riders. "You men in on this?"

They held their hands out wide from their gun belts and shrugged. The little one said, "I was hired to herd cows —not nursemaid Tracey Folsom." The other nodded.

Hathaway Folsom said, "You two take Buck into the house. Then you can pick up your saddle bags and come back for your time." To Ladd he said, "Tracey ain't here. I made him get out for a while to keep from having more trouble. He'll be coming back; if you have to have trouble, I expect he'll oblige you."

Tambling cursed Ladd bitterly. "Tracey'll oblige you all right. He's in Calico. Waiting for you, if you think you're lucky. Where your sheriff won't be around to get up a posse after he kills you."

"Tambling, you're a fool," Hathaway Folsom said. He stared at Ladd with chill eyes. "My advice to you— stay away from Calico, you want to live. Otherwise I guarantee you won't."

Ladd got up on the gelding and rode out past the corral. He did not want to look back at Martha.

HE WALKED the horse down the slope to the branch and let it drink deep while he knelt on the gravel to fill his canteen. The current drifted from pool to pool, skirting the dry shoals in narrow courses laced on the far side by scattered willows. Down the plain land to the Gila, itself obliging the call of the Colorado, westering to the ocean. Paw had liked to talk about why men came West in the earliest days. Gold—yes. Silver—maybe. Running from trouble—a lot of them. But mostly westering—the oldtimers' word, westering, the itch to make distance into the new country ahead.

Paw liked to marvel at the changes in the Territory. "Before you're my age, people will live civilized in Arizona with schools and railroads and fine merchant stores—with the most beautiful country that God ever made all around them. She'll grow up and tame the bad ones and shame the shiftless, but a man'll always have room to stretch and ride a hoss. You can't tame the land itself. Not this land. Mostly she's got to stay the way God made her."

Paw always talked about the Arizona Territory as if she was a woman—a beautiful woman dressed in dotted mesas and mountains and veiled canyons and jeweled with high-piled white clouds. A princess of Heaven, he called her, chuckling a little himself when the oldtimers guffawed to hear him talk.

The gelding nuzzled him. Ladd came up out of his hunker. He splashed across the water and rode into the sun. Two miles out from the Folsom house he turned along the edge of the sharp, rocky rise that fronted him and drew gradually off to the west. Not that he figured Tracey Folsom for a man to hide in the hills, yet not that he tried to figure any man for certain, as Paw had taught him. He stayed out of rifle shot of big cover and pushed steadily along. Once he fired his rifle and dismounted to hang a jack rabbit against his saddle roll. When he came to a good clump of mesquite leaning against the longer shadows, he stopped while there was light enough to hide a dry fire of the brittle thorny twigs.

The dark came on quickly while the

meat was still toasting. When he had satisfied himself on the stringy flesh, he went to the bed he had readied under the mesquite. He put his rifle down with him at the side of the blanket and rested his head back against his saddle. In two minutes he was asleep.

By first light he got in the saddle, munching cold rabbitt, and let the gelding have its head in a morning canter.

The sun was low over the river when he came into Calico's street, a double row of saloons, gambling halls, a boarding hotel, false front stores, and a livery stable, interspersed by open lots and shack offices. Calico was unpainted, grey dusty, haphazard, and imposing, for here dwelt, more or less permanently, four hundred souls. Although diverse in origin—for it was said that no man could live long enough to have been born in Calico—they were united in preying by means of card, bottle, greasy vittles, merchandise at triple even frontier prices, dubious services, and hazy advice upon honest men who came to ford the river and dishonest who tarried fraternally. Otherwise Calico looked exactly like Two Springs.

LADD RODE the length of the street to the ford, looking over the brands on the horses at the hitching rails before he turned back to the livery stable and unsaddled. While the stableman fetched a bucket of water and a measure of oats, he sauntered up and down the stalls. When he picked up his saddle bags and his rifle the man asked him, "Looking for somebody?"

"Looking for a good meal," Ladd told him, and went across the street to the Calico House, palatially two-storied. He paid a silver dollar for a room and went upstairs to wash up. He was starved, wondering at his hunger and the usual appearance of things that he had expected to be different, always, after he had come late into Two Springs from meeting with Martha and awakened in the morning to be told.

When he got to Room 4 he put down the saddle bags, shifted his rifle to his left hand, and lifted the latch. Picking up his burden, he pushed into the room.

"Howdy, Mister." The man on the bed was fully clothed, with dusty boots propped up on the foot rail.

"Maybe I got in the wrong room," Ladd answered him.

The door slammed shut behind him and something poked hard in his side. "You're in the right room, all right."

Sixgun in hand, the other man eased around in front of him and took Ladd's pistol from its holster. "Mighty fine weapon." He tossed it on the bed beside his partner. "Let's have a look at your rifle, too." When he had the Winchester, he stepped over to the only chair and sat down comfortably.

"You found the right room, all right," he repeated. "Leastways while you were looking for horses we asked the man downstairs to give you room 4."

Ladd dropped the saddle bags. He had walked right into it—like a jack rabbit into a simple deadfall. "I'm looking for Tracey Folsom." He bit off the words in anger. "You men want to take up for him, that's all right with me. Or you afraid to gun fight? Hiding up here."

The man on the bed sat up and stretched. "Real obliging fellow, downstairs, letting us have a nice restful place like this to wait for you while you did your horse chores."

His partner nodded. "Mighty obliging."

It didn't make sense. "Why the gun on me?" Ladd demanded.

The man on the bed stood up. "Real pert, ain't he? For a caught hoss-thief."

Ladd stared at him. "I thought you were Folsom hands. I'm John Ladd, from Two Springs."

"Now he's confessing," the man on the chair said.

"You men crazy?" Ladd snapped.

The other man said, "Joe, this man's talk is real interesting, but I'd better get on with it."

Joe crossed his legs easily, but his sixgun held steady on the pit of Ladd's stomach. "Better hurry. It'll look better, we get it over fast."

Ladd said, "You ain't getting nothing over fast. I'm taking my stuff and leaving."

"Whup," the other man said, "Better let me tell you something first. That'll be just fine with us. When you move—Joe, he shoots." He picked up Ladd's pistol from the bed. "At the same time we shoot off your gun and throw it at your feet." He grinned and handed Ladd's pistol to Joe. "So a caught hossthief gets shot dead trying to shoot his way out. Even when we've got the drop on him, a hossthief might figger on taking a chance like that."

Joe held Ladd's gun loosely in his left hand. "Take out, Hank; I got him."

Ladd thought rapidly. "If this is a shakedown, you men got poor pickings. I haven't got more than ten dollars on me. Likewise horse stealings are hard to prove unless you catch a man with your horse."

"That's just what Hank's about to find, is his horse with your saddle and saddle bags on him." He nodded at the bed. "Sit down and rest yourself, Friend; unless you want to try escaping. We ain't got nothing against you personally."

HANK KICKED the saddle bags away from Ladd's feet; then stooped to pick them up. "Be back in ten minutes," he announced and closed the door behind him.

"You can't make a shakedown like that stick, even in Calico, putting my stuff on another horse. Forty men saw me ride in town less than an hour ago on my own."

"You know that's what I told Buck when he sprung the idea. To keep you from shooting it out with Tracey Folsom, he says, and maybe killing the old man's boy. That's just exactly what I told him. And a long hard ride it'd be down here, too. Take all night."

"Buck Tambling!" Ladd exclaimed. "So you *are* from Folsom."

"May as well sit down and have a smoke."

'What are you going to do when you have to take that gun off me and go away?" Ladd threw at him. "I'll be coming for you later, and I won't pull off on you like I did Tambling."

Joe waved again at the bed. "Sit down and smoke. You know, you're mighty good at figgering things out. That's exactly what I told Buck. He said he didn't figger it would stick either, and that is why you would have to get killed dead trying to shoot your way loose."

Dumbfounded, Ladd sat down on the bed. "Hathaway Folsom's not going to hold for murder," he said, thinking rapidly.

"Old man Folsom's got nothing to do with it; this is Buck's roundup."

It was neat. Perfect. It was so simple there was no way out. "What's it worth to you and your partner to forget this?"

Joe looked at him speculatively. "You must have riled Buck considerably; it was worth fifty dollars apiece to him."

"I'll make it a hundred."

Joe p o n d e r e d it over. "Buck wouldn't like it a bit."

"You're a fool," Ladd snarled. "Tambling's not going to pay you."

Joe shook his head regretfully. "I got to take a chance on Buck, but I ain't going to take a chance of having him after me—and you too." He sucked reflectively at his teeth. "No, it's hard luck for you, Fellow, but it can't be helped."

Ladd thought he could hear Paw's

watch ticking off the time in his pants pocket. He sat immobile while the minutes fled, watching Joe's easy air fade and the man become tense. Ladd realized the man was listening for Hank's tread on the stair.

Five feet away, but Joe had only to pull a trigger. Even while his muscles bunched involuntarily for the leap, he held himself back, knowing it was as hopeless as a man scooping for water in loose sand. Joe had only to squeeze the trigger, and the heavy .44 slug would tear the life out of him before he could get off the bed.

WHEN THE steps sounded on the stairs, Joe visibly relaxed. "I kinda hate to do this," he said, "so we'll make it quick. As soon as Hank says he's got the hoss saddled."

Ladd watched him narrowly, but his eyes did not waver as the latch clicked and the door cracked open.

"Well, who'd ever thought the boy sheriff'd be caught horse thieving?"

At the first words Ladd swung, jumping to his feet.

Tracey Folsom's gun leaped into his hand. "Hold back!" He stepped into the room and let Hank come into the room behind him, the saddle switch apparently accomplished.

Ladd cursed him. "I might have known you'd be in on a stinking trick like this."

Tracey laughed tolerantly, smoothing his moustache with his thumb. "I just wanted to make sure the boys had the right bird. Not that I don't trust them, I just don't like to have a guncrazy buck trailing me. Sorta spoils a man's pleasure, having to look out all the time." He put up his gun. "Watch him, Joe. Give me ten minutes to get over to the *Spade Ace* and get back in the game."

"Gun or no gun I'm coming for you," Ladd shouted; "you can shoot and be damned, you damned murderer!"

Fingers curling, he started forward. A crashing blow caught him on the side of the head, and he was aware that he was sitting on the floor.

When his eyes cleared a little, he shook his head. The left side of his face was numb.

"I had to slap you with my gun." Joe sounded far away, but his mind clearing rapidly, he understood him.

"You shouldn't ought to have started after Tracey," Hank admonished him. "Now you got yourself a bad headache."

Tracey Folsom was gone. One minute or five or almost ten, Ladd remembered, but he did not know how long.

Then it struck him. If Tracey had only just gone, they would try to keep from shooting until he got back to his game, where he could sit with clean hands.

He pretended to retch violently.

"Damn," he heard Hank say, "you hit him hard enough to kill a mule."

Staggering and stretching, Ladd got to his feet and lurched toward the window as if he were out on his feet. "He's going to be sick," Joe said. Ladd felt him push him towards the window.

He fell heavily against Joe, clutching blindly. Suddenly with a quick twist he threw his knee hard into the man's groin, dropping him screaming to the floor.

Before the startled Hank, eyes registered comprehension, Ladd dived for Joe's gun. He snatched it from the floor and fired, watching with surging joy while Hank was driven hard around, the shot he reflexively pulled off smashing into the floor. Then the eyes hardened, and the body fell.

Joe had fainted.

Hate boiling over, Ladd found his own gun and took to the stairs.

THE SPADE ACE was not crowded. Tracey Folsom sat easily at a card table, facing the door. He saw Ladd the instant he stepped inside, his eyes widening, amazed, then centering on the pistol that covered him. He sat

still, his palms flat on the table before him. The hushing babble at the bar swung the other card players around to stare.

Ladd saw Tracey's fingers crawl up, tense against the table top. "I wouldn't try it," he said. He stepped up to him. "Just get up slow and turn around."

Eyes hard grey, Tracey pushed back his chair, his hands rising warily to his shoulders.

Ladd stepped around to him and jerked the Colt out of his holster. He broke out the cylinder and threw the gun clattering into the corner.

"You think you're making an arrest?" Tracey drawled.

"I'll calling the turn this time!" Ladd rasped. "First I'm marching you outside; then I'm going to kill you with my bare hands."

Tracey Folsom sneered. "Ever reckon I might object to that?"

"Move out!"

Tracey put down his hands. "Come on, Boys. I think he wants to fight." He unbuckled his gunbelt and threw it on the table.

Ladd went to the bar and handed across his belt and gun. "Hold these; I don't need them for him."

They circled each other in the street dust, testing the moment. When Ladd could no longer hold down the flame within, he threw his heavy weight forward, stretched out, groping for Tracey's throat. A hard blow slammed against his cheek bone, rocking his head back, and the elusive figure before him laughed mockingly. He swung heavy clubbing fists at it, anger out of all control as they glanced away from solid impact. He became only dimy aware of the shocks of the belting he was taking.

Then Tracey moved in. He swung hard into Ladd's waist and drove a loping fist home to his jaw. Ladd sat in the dust, shaking his head. He cleared his eyes in time to roll away from the kick at his throat that would have finished him. Clutching at the foot, he pulled Tracey flat on his back in the dust.

Ladd made it to his feet. When Tracey got his knees under him, he clubbed him down again with a side-swinging blow. Then he let him get all the way up before he measured him and struck him flat again.

Sobbing for air, Ladd became conscious of the roaring ring of men around the fight. With each blow he landed against the staggering object pushing itself on its feet and trying to cover itself up, they shouted, loud and high-pitched. The fevered noise drove him, raging hot for his kill.

The object went down, and Ladd flung down on the wirey squirming body, now thoughtless of the offensive, trying only to shield itself.

It was not a small body. It was tough and violent in its upthrusting. It leaped and twisted and clawed and kicked, but hands still bore against its throat and Ladd looked down full into the hateful, moustache-distorted, eye-bulging face. Against the frantic weight of arms straining supremely at his hands, he tightened the grip and leaned on it with the last of his power while the convulsions against him slackened wildly until they stilled.

A GUTTERAL, many-voiced excitement rose up and smote against him. He looked up wonderingly at the lewd faces: twisted, intent, gaping-expectant. All at once he shoved himself up from the dust, erect, staring at the faces. "He's not dead," he told them dully. "I didn't kill him yet; I'm not going to kill him."

With one long-held breath exhaled, the faces changed into jabbering herders, lone-trail prospectors, barkeeps and store clerks, card players and gamblers, teamsters, loafers, and plain dwellers of Calico.

Now they were talkative. "God, I thought he was a goner."

"Fair fistfight. Best man wins. Not some dude gunslinger."

"Man to man—only way to settle something."

"Just got here in time to see the last of it."

"What started it?"

"You ought to finished him while you had him down. Now you got an enemy for life. Sooner or later he puts a bullet in your back."

Swaying on his feet with muscle ache, Ladd heard them distantly. His lungs pulled at the dry Arizona air. He was looking afar, at the deepening sunset, reminded of quiet falling over plain and hill and long-shadowed grass beside a clear branchwater. Now was the time for a cooking fire and a slow pipe, the feel of the starlight dark and Paw talking about the early days. Somehow he had not thought the fights and the killings had ever been like this.

He spoke to the man with the town marshal's star. "I'm swearing out a warant for this man for a killing up at Two Springs. I want you to lock him up until I get here with the papers to take him back."

The marshal stared. "You better go get you a drink and set yourself down a spell."

"I'm telling you now," Ladd crowded the man. "He shot Abner Ladd up at Two Springs Thursday night, he's going back to stand trial for it. Gunfight or no gunfight, that's the law."

The marshal removed his dusty hat to rub at his scalp. "Him beat out Sheriff Ladd in a gun fight?" With some wonderment he looked at Tracey. "Who be you?"

Ladd told him, and at last he agreed to take Tracey Folsom into custody, shaking his head and wondering over Sheriff Abner Ladd, of whom he allowed he had heard a lot. "He gave Two Spings the name of a bad town for a man to get in trouble in."

Ladd corrected him. "He made it a good town for a man to stay out of trouble in."

FOLSOM RANCH house came in view as he topped the rise. Ladd got up in the stirrups and dismounted to limber his saddle-weary legs.

He was confident and sure. He knocked out his pipe and rode down the long sloping land towards Summer Run and Folsom house. Indifferent to the curiosity of the cook who came out of his cook shack, he rode past the deserted corral and up to the porch.

"Martha!" he shouted. "Martha!"

With a flurry of running footfalls on wooden floor she burst from the house.

"John! John, it's you!" Her hand went up to her throat. "Your face! Did you—?"

"No." He touched the bruises with his fingertips. "He's in Calico jail; I fought with him and put him in jail."

"I'm glad!" she cried. "Oh, John, I've worried to death. You could have been killed!"

Ladd said, "Come here and get on this horse. You're not taking anything from here but the clothes on your back, and we're sending those back tomorrow."

"Go with you? Now?" She retreated up the porch. "I couldn't; not now."

"Now!"

"Father's away. I'll have to tell him. I'll have to explain to him."

Ladd said, "Martha, I mean it. You come here and get on this horse."

She turned, as if to escape. She brushed at her hair and looked around, for what kind of help Ladd could not suppose. "John!" she cried and ran down the steps.

Ladd swung her up into the saddle. "This horse is tired, but he's not that tired. Let's go. I got a badge to pick up."

After a while she said, "I'll write Father when you send back by dress."

Some time later he answered her. "I got to say I didn't do it for you."

"I know," she said.

★

There was nothing you could pin on Harry Doyle except that he claimed he'd bought out Matt Munsey, and Munsey had disappeared. But Ahab Gray had a plan which might make a guilty man betray himself...

PHANTOM HOOVES

by PETER NORCROSS

The stretched rope trick was good.

A THIN wisp of smoke curled lazily upward above the tops of the tall cottonweed trees in the distance, climbed gently, unhurriedly, into the reaches of the vast blue sky. Ahab Gray watching it, grinned happily.

The big black horse, too, seemed to sense the nearness of food and shelter and he quickened his pace. They loped over the thick, lush grass of the valley floor, topped a rise and came in sight of the cabin.

Gray nudged the black with his knees, mechanically, and the big horse broke into a swift gallop.

There was a man standing in the open doorway of the cabin.

"Matt!" Gray yelled through cupped hands.

He saw the man look up quickly and step out, but curiously there was no answering shout or acknowledging wave of his hand. There was something lacking...that wasn't the way Matt Munsey usually greeted an old friend. Gray's spurs grazed the black's flanks and the big horse flashed over the ground at breakneck speed. They came whirling up to the cabin and Gray's fears about Matt vanished instantly. The man was a stranger, a stocky gent with a swarthy, unshaven face. The black slid to a stiff-legged halt.

"Howdy," Gray said.

The man did not reply. His eyes ranged over the big horse, upward and over the black-clad man astride him. His probing eyes lingered longest over the brace of heavy Colts that swung against Gray's thighs.

"Howdy," he grunted finally.

Gray shoved his dust-streaked hat upward, away from his eyes.

"Matt around?"

"Who?"

Gray looked back surprised. Certainly he was taken back.

"Matt Munsey. This is his place, ain't it?"

"Was once," the man replied. "Ain't 'ny more."

"Yuh mean Matt's gone...sold out?"

The stocky man hitched up his belt. He swung his holster a bit farther front. "Yep. Sold out t' me."

"Wa-al I'll be doggoned! Where'd he go to? An' how long ago did this happen?"

A scowl deepened on the man's face. "Wait a minute, Mister," he said curtly. "Who are you? Friend o' Munsey's?"

"Course. Think I'd bother askin' so danged many questions if I wasn't?"

Their eyes met and clashed. There was momentary pause, a silence. The man finally shrugged his shoulders.

"Whatever you say, Mister," he said calmly. "It ain't that I aim t' be ornery or anythin'. It's on'y that there's been a hull heap o' th' meanest-lookin critters turnin' up in these parts lately that's makin' me s' damned leery an' suspicious. Most o' them look like they're just about to whoop an' a holler ahead uv a sheriff an' a hangin' an' they're plumb full o' questions, too.

"But if you say yuh're a freiend o' Matt Munsey's it's awright with me. I've told yuh all I know 'bout 'im 'cept mebbe how fed up he was with things aroun' here. Anyway, when I made 'im 'n offer he snapped it up, took 'is money an' went."

"I see. An' how long ago did yuh say that was?"

"I didn't say, but it was 'bout three months ago."

Gray settled his hat on his head.

"Oh, yeah," the man added as an after thought. "Now that I think back, Munsey said somethin' 'bout wantin' t' see what California was like. Yep, that's where he said he was goin'."

Gray nodded.

"California, eh?" he mused thoughtfully, then he nodded again. "Uh-huh. that sounds like Matt awright. Far back's I c'n remember he was allus talkin' about California an' about goin' there sometime. Fr'm what yuh've just made it, eh? Wa-al, that's that. There ain't 'ny-thing I c'n do about it. I'm obliged to yuh, partner, f'r tellin' me what happened."

He wheeled the black.

"Oh yeah," he said over his shoulder. "My name's Gray. Don't think I got yourn."

"Nope," the stocky man replied. "Don't think yuh did. It's Doyle, Henry Doyle. An' if yuh wanna check up on me, soon's yuh hit town head f'r th' sheriff's office. Th' bill o' sale's on file there."

AHAB GRAY halted the black just inside the town. It was a typical cow town; there was but a single street with a varied assortment of shacks and stores, half of them saloons, a hotel of sorts, a livery stable and the usual undertaker-barber shop.

"Uh-huh," he muttered. "Same's a hundred other towns I've been in. Deader'n all hell in th' daytime an' full o' hell at night when th' punchers fr'm th' ranches come ridin' in lookin' f'r excitement an' a little liquid r'freshment."

He nudged the black with his knees and the big horse jogged on. A lone horse was tied up at the hitching-rail in front of a saloon. He looked up

eagerly when the black came clattering up the street, whinnied and twisted around. The black snorted an acknowledgement and went on.

A bit farther down the street, two men were standing in the doorway of the hotel. They halted their conversation and gave Gray an inquiring glance; he loped past them and they promptly forgot about him, turned their heads away and resumed their conversation.

Fifty feet beyond the hotel a sign with faded, weather-beaten letters that formed the word, *Sheriff,* jutted out from above the doorway of a single-story high building. Gray pulled up, dismounted, trudged across the narrow wooden sidewalk to the door, opened it and looked in. There was a badly battered desk in the very middle of the room; a burly man, thumbing through a handful of papers, sat behind the desk.

"Howdy," Gray said.

The man looked up. "Howdy."

"You th' sheriff?"

"That's what th' sign outside says, don't it?"

Gray grinned. He stepped inside, closed the door behind him and sauntered forward to the desk.

"Alwright, Mister. What'll yuh have?"

"Just s'me info'mation," Gray answered. "I'm lookin' f'r Matt Munsey."

"Y'are? Why?"

"Why?" Gray echoed in surprise. "I'm a friend o' his. That good enough reason f'r me wantin' t' see 'im?"

THE BURLY man shrugged his shoulders. "Might be."

Gray gave him a cold stare. "I stopped at Matt's place," he went on again presently, "but he wasn't there. Found a feller named Doyle there instead. He told me Matt sold out t' him. That right?"

"Far's I know it is."

"I see. Th' bill o' sale been registered here?"

"Yep."

"Matt sign it?"

"Yep, with a cross," the sheriff answered. "Same's he allus signed things bein' he couldn't write a lick. Anythin' else yuh wanna know?"

"C'n I see th' thing?"

"Y'mean th' bill o' sale? Doggone it, man...ain't I just told yuh that it's registered here?"

"Yeah, shore...on'y whose name's on it as a witness to th' deal?"

The sheriff frowned. "Mine," he snapped.

"Oh...then you saw Matt sign it," Gray pressed him, "leastways, make his mark on it?"

The frown deepened on the sheriff's face. "Hold on a minute," he sputtered indignantly. "Who'n hell are you, anyway, huh...an' what right you got bustin' in here an' firin' questions at me?"

"I'm a citizen an' that gives me some rights," Gray retorted. "But just in case they ain't enough, I got a couple o' fellers named Colt along t' do my talkin'. Let's see if they c'n satisfy yuh. Here!"

HIS HANDS dropped. His shoulders twitched the barest bit. Two big Colts fairly leaped upward from his holsters, into his hands. The sheriff's eyes bulged. He gulped, swallowed hard. It was incredulous...he hadn't seen Ahab Gray go through the usual drawing motions, yet here he was staring at the muzzles of the blackclad man's guns and they seemed to expand with each passing second. He moistened his parched lips. Gray, watching him, grunted and finally holstered his guns.

"I'm listenin'," he said curtly

"Wa-al," the sheriff began presently. "Far's I c'n r'member it, Doyle bring th' bill o' sale into me together with th' fee."

"Matt had made his mark on it

already, see? Far's I could see it shore looked like it was his, so I just took it an' registered it like I'm s'pposed to. That's all there was to it."

Gray snorted scornfully. "That's what you think," he snapped. "Tell me ...how long'd you know Matt?"

The sheriff looked ceilingward for a thoughtful moment. "O-h, couple o' years, I s'ppose. Why?"

"Know his wife, too?"

"Jennie? I shore did. She was a fine woman, Mister. But heck...she's dead, y'know. Has been f'r quite a spell, too."

" 'Course I know," Gray said gruffly. "D'yuh know where she's buried?"

"Yep...right on th' place."

"Uh-huh, so's she'd never be outta Matt's sight. That oughta give yuh 'n idea o' how loco he was about 'er, dead or alive. She still in th' same place?"

"Yep...leastways she was th' last time I come past there. That was on'y last week, too, Thursd'y I think it was."

"Alwright then. Now c'n you picture Matt leavin' her there, in some stranger's hands, while he heads f'r California, not knowin' whether or not he's ever comin' back again?"

"Never thought o' that," the sheriff admitted begrudgingly. "Now that I think uv it, I'm kinda s'prised that Matt didn't move er' out t' th' cemetery we got outside o' town. She'da been awright there."

" 'Course," Gray said quickly. "An' b'cause he didn't do it I'm more'n just a mite suspicious o' th' hull thing."

The sheriff shook his head. "Just what'n hell are you drivin' at, Mister?"

Gray stiffened. "Sheriff, you ain't just natur'lly dumb," he said coldly, with finality. "You're unnatur'lly dumb. You're dumber'n all hell an' no mistake."

He turned on his heel.

"Wait a minute," the sheriff called.

Gray looked back at him over his shoulder, gave him a cold stare. He reached the door, flung it open and stalked out. The sheriff frowned, rubbed his bristly chin with his right thumb, slowly and thoughtfully.

"I dunno," he muttered presently. "Mebbe I am dumb. I'm doggoned if I c'n savvy what he was drivin' at."

EVENING brought an end to the town's daytime comparative calm and quiet. With the first lengthening shadows, flickering lights appeared in the store and saloon windows along the street, then a sharp, furious clatter of approaching hoofs signalled the arrival of the first bunch of punchers from one of the outlying ranches. They came into town at a full gallop, whooping and yelling, whirled up the street and jerked to a halt in front of their favorite saloon. Another group followed close behind, dashed past them and reined in a bit farther up the street.

It was a moment's work to dismount and tie up their horses at the hitching posts and rails. There was loud, unguarded talk and uproarious laughter; there was considerable horseplay and roughhouse, the exuberance of nature-toughened, carefree men who lived each day for itself and who gave no thought to the morrow. Their day's work was done.

Ahab Gray halted the black in front of one of the larger saloons. There was no name on its dirt-streaked window, nothing but the last three letters of the word "saloon." He dismounted, tied up the big horse at the rail, dodged another horse's swishing tail and sauntered across the sidewalk. A couple of men were standing just inside the doorway of the saloon; they stepped aside in order to permit him to enter. One of the men gave him a casual nod of greeting and Gray gravely acknowledged it with a nod of his own.

Billowing tobacco smoke hung motionlessly overhead, like an anchored cloud. The stronger smell of hops and

beer was almost overpowering and breathtaking at first; but once within the saloon one soon forgot them. The bar was crowded...one or two men standing there turned and glanced at him as he approached but beyond that no one seemed to take much notice of him.

He found a vacant spot near the end of the bar...the bartender looked up at him, questioningly but appraisingly. His eyes ranged over the black-clad man. In that brief moment's glance he made his own decision as to what a man of Ahab Gray's type would drink. Obviously he decided that Gray was not a beer drinker for he planted a small glass on the bar in front of Gray, followed it with an uncorked bottle of whiskey. He watched for another moment...when Gray reached for the bottle, the bartender's expression was one of satisfaction and vindication. Presently he turned away.

Gray poured himelf a drink, downed it, dropped a coin on the wet surface of the bar and turned around. His eyes swept the place. It was crowded to capacity, with every table occupied. Card games were in progress at almost all of them. A far-corner table, a bit larger than the others, with half a dozen men sitting around it, playing poker, caught his eye for one of them was the stocky, swarthy Doyle. Gray straightened up, hitched up his gunbelt mechanically, sauntered away from the bar. He threaded his way past the other tables, halted when he came to Doyle's. The latter looked up, nodded to Gray, tossed his cards away. "Still around, eh?"

"Yep, layin' over f'r a couple o' days."

Doyle gave him a sidelong glance ...there was a raking-in of the pot, a rather meagre one, then another dealing-out with his cards. Gray noticed a small, leather-thonged bag at Doyle's elbow. Doyle studied his cards for a moment, grinned, then he laughed aloud. He opened the bag, drew something out of it, hefted it and slid it into the middle of the table.

"It's open," Doyle said. "Tinhorns stay out."

One of the other players reached for the tiny nugget, picked it up and examined it interestedly.

"S'awright, partner," Doyle said gruffly. "It's gold."

The man nodded quickly. "I c'n see that awright," he said. "I was s'prised, that's all, b'cause there ain't been 'ny strikes 'round these parts in a helluva long time."

A scowl darkened Doyle's normally dark face. "So what?" he retorted. "This th' on'y place in th' hull world that ever had 'nybody strike gold?"

"Nope," the other man said easily. "But you couldn't've dug up this hunk o' gold far away fr'm here. This ain't outta th' ground long...there's a tiny speck o' dirt still clingin' to it an' it's damp an' fresh."

Doyle's lips thinned. "You playin' poker, Mister, or you just tin-hornin'?" he asked coldly.

"I'm playin'."

"Then shut up!"

The man dropped a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table. The other players tossed their cards away.

"How many, Doyle?" the dealer asked.

"I got more'n enough now."

"How 'bout you, Tom?"

"Two'll do, pr'vided they're good."

Harry Doyle relaxed. He grinned easily now, settled himself a bit more comfortably in his chair. "Give 'im th' hull deck," he said almost amiably. "There ain't 'ny better ones left in it than I got a'ready."

Tom tossed aside his unwanted cards, picked up his "draw." Doyle planted another nugget, a larger one than the first, in the middle of the table.

"That's worth fifty, partner. You got guts enough t' match it?" he asked, making no attempt to conceal his scorn.

THE MAN named Tom smiled lightly. He dropped a couple of gold pieces on the table, added two more. Doyle stared at him with widened eyes. "You raisin' me?"

"Shore, 'less there's a law against it."

Doyle scowled darkly again. Two more large-sized nuggets clinked metallically on the table. "I'm raisin' you," he snapped.

Tom nodded, dropped a couple of gold pieces on the table. Doyle grunted, shoved them into the middle of the table.

"Awright, Doyle," Tom said presently. "What've yuh got?"

The swarthy man laughed. "Four aces," he replied and spread his cards out on the table. "How d'yuh like them apples, partner?"

Tom laughed softly. "Awright, on'y I like these a heap better," he said, putting down his cards, spreading them out in a single row. "Straight flush, Doyle. Queen high."

The swarthy face of Doyle seemed curiously white for a moment. "I'll be damned!" he gasped. He caught up the bag, tore it open, dumped its contents on the table. "There's a thousand in there. Match it, winner take all, any way yuh like!"

Tom was silent for a moment. He raked in the nuggets, heaped them in a tiny pile in front of him, picked up the gold pieces and stacked them beside the nuggets.

"Well?" Doyle demanded impatiently.

Tom glanced at him, however he did not answer.

The swarthy man's lips curled. "Just like I figgered," he said sneeringly. "Ain't got th' guts."

One of the men sitting on the opposite side of the table leaned forward. "Tom," he said, "if yuh're holdin' back b'cause yuh're short, just say th' word. I got four or five hun'erd here yuh c'n have. Your credit an' word's good enough f'r me, y'know."

Harry Doyle snorted loudly, but he refrained from making any comment.

"Thanks, Jerry," Tom said finally. "If yuh're willin' t' lemme have three hundred, reckon that'll do it just right."

"Three hun'erd it is," Jerry said heartily, and shoved a handful of crumpled bills across the table. "Here y'are, Tom."

Ahab Gray turned away. He had seen and heard enough; now he felt the need for quiet thinking. He hitched up his gunbelt, strode out of the place, halted for a moment on the sidewalk. The black raised his head, whinnied softly.

"Gold," he muttered to himself. "An' fresh from dirt still clingin' to it."

The light from the kerosene lamps in the saloon sifted through its dirty windows and open door and cast an eerie, yellowish gleam over the sidewalk and the rutted gutter and reached a point probably a foot or two short of midway across.

"Gold," Gray repeated thoughtfully. "An' th' funny thing about it is that there ain't been 'ny strikes r'ported 'round these parts in some time."

He stepped to the curb and down into the gutter, warily circled a group of impatient, ground-pawing horses that were tied up at the rail alongside the black, untied the big horse and backed him into the street. He climbed up into the saddle, wheeled the black and sent him loping down the street.

THE FAR-SPREADING, limitless sky was blue and star-studded. A breathless silence, a hushed stillness, had draped its veil over the range, the valley, even the foothills now barely discernible against the distant, northern skylines. Yet beneath it one heard what appeared to be a faint, indistinct babbling, a murmuring of voices, and light, carefree, musical laughter. Presently, however, one realized that it was

purely imaginary, that the murmuring, even the fancied laughter, was nothing more than the stirring created by a vagrant breeze that droned fleetingly through the grass and rustled the leaves. Then the breeze died down and everything was still again.

Somewhere in the enveloping darkness a twig cracked, shattering the silence again, and a horseman flashed by with unbelievable swiftness. Suddenly, too, a light appeared in the darkness and where just a moment before nothing but solid blackness had been visible, the dim outline of a small, rambling ranch-house now took form. The door of the house was opened a bit and a man peered out, cautiously at first for a hoof beat in the dead of night might mean a raid, and a man's life might depend upon his ability to preserve it.

When nothing happened, the man opened the door wider, stepped outside, a stocky, half-dressed figure with a rifle in his hand, silhouetted against the background of shaded lamplight. For a minute or two the man stared into the darkness about him. When a shadow that blended with the distorting night light suddenly arose and moved, the man's rifle jerked upward and flame spurted from its muzzle. The accompanying crash of the explosion was startlingly frightening.

But presently the shadow lost whatever resemblance it might have had to human form, billowed skyward and dissolved into nothingness. The man lowered his rifle. But he still waited, tensed and rigid in the open doorway. The minutes passed. The man relaxed, trudged back inside, slammed the door and presently the light went out.

Three times more in the waning hours of the night the swelling then almost instantly retreating echo of flashing hoofbeats shattered the silence; each time the man bounded from his bed and each time his sleepladen, heavy-lidded eyes fancied a movement or a stirring somewhere in the darkness beyond and each time the rifle belched flame. But then he heard the hoofbeats fading away in the distance, and he cursed aloud, lowered his rifle angrily and plodded back into the house. Each time he slammed the door shut a bit louder than before.

Eventually it was morning. The dawn light appeared on the horizon, deepened into a glow, pierced the veil of darkness; quickly an unseen hand whisked the shadowy mantle away. Trees and brush and boulders, the house itself, the foothills northward, suddenly burst into view and being. Everything earthly stood out boldly against the awakening, brightening sky. But the stocky man, wearied and sleeplessly heavy-eyed, found the daylight even more exacting and demanding than the obscuring night.

A fatigued mind built up his unknown tormentor to frightening heights. It forced him to remain indoors for behind each tree and boulder he was certain an enemy lurked. There was no rest for him, no respite. He alternated between the windows and peering out, probing the trees and brush, and the door where he listened intently. Every sound, real and imaginary, caused him to stiffen with expectation. But even inside the house the very echo of his own footfall startled him and caused him to jump or whirl.

MORNING passed, noon, then the early afternoon. Time hung heavily on the tired Harry Doyle, who was waiting for something to return, a something that was a horseman who cunningly refused to show himself in the light of day and thus betray himself; a man who declined to give him even the tiniest clue to his identity, and above all, to reveal his purpose in tormenting him. Through his mind paraded the faces of practically everyone whom he had ever known. Some of them were vague and faint and he dismissed them without much ado. Tom, Jerry, the sheriff, the bartender, every-

one in the town and in the county came in for study, some more prolonged than others.

Ahab Gray, too, was considered but Doyle was satisfied that it couldn't be the black-clad man. Gray was doubtless a drifter; he would be on his way again shortly and that would be the end of him.

The afternoon wore away and at dusk the sun slipped silently by into a distant point in the west. A last, fleeting glimpse at the earth below, then it disappeared. The early shadows of evening appeared and Doyle checked the bolts on the windows and the back door, drew down the faded blinds over the windows, and took up his vigil in a chair just behind the crack of the slightly opened front door. His rifle, fully loaded again, he laid across his knees. This time, he told himself grimly, he would be ready for instant action when the ghost rider returned.

Night came on swiftly, surprisingly so to the waiting man, and his uneasiness increased. Never before had he known night to fall so quickly. His tired mind decided that even the elements had joined the conspiracy against him. He clutched the rifle tightly. This was a new experience for him; he was afraid. It was a strange kind of fear that gripped him, the uneasy, distorted fear of the unknown. If only he knew who this unknown horseman was, knew what he was up to!

Suddenly he heard the thunderous pounding of racing hoofs. He sprang to his feet, flung open the door and burst out. He whirled to meet the oncoming horseman, his rifle raised and ready. The silence, the waiting, his sleeplessness, everything e m o t i o n a l combined within him. He could control himself no longer.

"Come on, damn yuh!" he screamed hysterically. "Come on!"

Then there was a curious, puzzling silence...the hoofbeats slackened and died away. Doyle scowled...he couldn't understand what had happened. Slowly, guardedly the rifle came down, then with startling suddenness the furious clatter broke out again, swelled to its highest pitch and in almost the same instant ceased.

Too late, Doyle realized what had happened and how he himself had contributed to it...his cry had warned the ghost rider away, had caused him to check his mount, swerve him away from the front of the house and into the lush, sound-absorbing grass that flanked it and send him pounding around the rear! In another moment, while the swarthy man stood rooted to the very ground, he was gone and his horse's flashing hoofs had swept him away into the protective darkness.

Doyle tramped back to his chair, seated himself heavily, and laid the rifle across his knees. He noticed then that his hands were clammy with sweat. He wiped them on his pants, mopped his face and forehead with his shirt sleeve. Suddenly he sat upright. He arose, stiffly but with alacrity, trudged through the darkened house to the rear. He unlocked the back door, put down his rifle and emerged into the open. There was a squat, shadow-distorted structure...a tool shed it later developed...some twenty feet beyond the house. He strode briskly and directly to the shed; the door creaked open and he disappeared inside the building.

He backed out a minute later, dragging a heavy coil rope along the ground. He halted midway between the shed and the house, caught up a loose end of the coil, carried it away and looped it around a tree stump beside the house, jerked the rope taut, then he backed off into the darkness, playing out the coil.

THERE WERE sturdy-trunked trees beyond the shed and on both sides of it. Doyle whirled the rope around them, pulled it tight. Presently, he was finished; he had roped off a considerable area. He tested the rope, pushed

it down until it was barely a foot above the ground, then he straightened up, laughed softly, evilly, and went back indoors.

He returned to his chair, satisfied that he had prepared a perfect trap. A smile toyed at the corners of his mouth. He was already picturing the result of his labors and ingenuity... he could actually "see" the ghost rider tearing around the house, his horse plunging full tilt into the taut, darkness-obscured rope, stumbling and hurling his rider over his head. Doyle laughed. He seemed easier now, more relaxed, his tiredness forgotten, patient and content to await developments now that he had taken steps to counteract them.

Time went by, ten minutes, twenty minutes, a half hour, then a full hour, a drawn-out eternity for the tired and impatient Harry Doyle. The smile of cunning and of expected triumph vanished. Time and the failure of the ghost rider to return had already taken the edge off Doyle's surefire plan. The anxious waiting, the necessity for being continually on the alert, the heavy silence...began to pall upon him.

He again became aware of his extreme weariness and he began to lose confidence. His tiredness made him increasingly restless. He shifted himself in his chair, first this way, then that, finally climbed to his feet, opened the door a bit wider and peered out, probing the night light and flitting shadows with anxious eyes.

He muttered something to himself, an indistinct grumbling generously studded with curses, turned away from the door, put down his rifle beside the chair and plodded away through the darkness to the kitchen. He returned shortly, wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve. Again he peered out but he could see nothing unusual. He came away from the door, stood thoughtfully beside his chair for a moment then he tramped off again.

When he returned he was clutching a bottle of whiskey which he placed on the floor beside the chair. He sat down again, uncorked the bottle and raised it to his mouth. He drank deeply, sighed and took another swallow. He wiped his lips with his sleeve, put down the bottle between his feet. He sank back in the chair, remembered the cork in his hand, raised his arm and threw the thing away. He closed his eyes and sighed...if only he could sleep.

But after a moment's rest, he opened his eyes again, forcibly and reluctantly, but there was no avoiding it. He reached for the rifle, lifted it and laid it across his knees. He fumbled along the floor for the whiskey bottle, cursed angrily when he failed to find it, remembered then that he had put it down between his feet, caught it up and took still another drink.

Some of the whiskey ran down his stubbly chin and dampened his shirtfront but he disregarded it. He gagged and coughed, put down the bottle, yawned and settled back in the chair. He stretched his legs, heard the half-emptied bottle topple over to the floor but he was too tired to retrieve it. He heard it roll across the floor, heard it collide with something on the far side of the room.

His eyes closed gently. Minutes passed. A sigh of weariness escaped him, then a snore. Harry Doyle was asleep. The rifle slipped off his knees, slid down along his legs and clattered to the floor. The door creaked and opened, halted only when it collided with the arm of his chair.

Shadows that were definitely shadows flitted about with the gentle easy, capering grace of shadows; now a shadow that was man-made arose, separated itself from the enveloping darkness. The figure of a tall man emerged, halted briefly in the open. The man studied the house, suddenly bolted off toward the front of it. He raced over the

ground with the stride and fleetness of a deer, noiselessly as one, too, flattened out against the wall, seeking the protection of its shadowy darkness, then he crept toward the front door. The darkness veiled his face, prevented one's seeing the look of surprise on it when he found the door ajar. He was motionless for the briefest of moments, then he burst into the house. There was a loud yell from within, a short-lived scuffle judging by the swiftness with which silence again prevailed, a lull, then a light suddenly appeared in the house.

THE SUN-DRENCHED street was deserted. In the bright light of morning the shacks and buildings that lined the street seemed more faded than ever. There was a clatter of hoofs, totally unnoticed for it was much too warm for anyone to bestir himself and peer out. The horseman reined in front of the sheriff's office. He dismounted...one heard his step on the wooden sidewalk. He pushed the door open.

The sheriff was seated at his desk. There were two other men present... one of them was perched on the edge of the desk while his companion was squatting on his heels, his back against the far wall. All three men looked up, looked at the tall, black-clad man standing in the open doorway. The sheriff frowned.

"Oh...it's you again, eh?"

"Yep," Ahab Gray answered evenly. "I'm back again."

The other men eyed Gray interestedly. The one who had perched himself on the desk nodded to him, added a friendly grin.

"Howdy," he said. "Don't pay 'ny 'ttention to Gabe. Th' heat's got 'im down."

Gray sauntered forward to the desk. The sheriff looked up at him critically.

"Hope you ain't plannin' t' go into that danged Munsey bus'ness again.

Mister," he said. "It's too doggoned hot f'r arguin'."

"Keep your shirt on," Gray replied. "I got other things t' do b'side argue."

The sheriff grunted. "Then why don'tcha go an' do 'em?"

"I aim to, presently," Gray retorted. "If yuh think yuh c'n stop belly-achin' about th' heat f'r a minute an' keep them ears o' yours fr'm flappin', I got somethin' interestin' t' tell you."

"You needn'ta bothered t' go outta your way just t' let me know yuh was leavin' town," the sheriff said dryly.

Gray's eyes gleamed menacingly and the sheriff quickly averted his eyes. But he looked up again presently. "Wa-al?" he demanded. "What's botherin' yuh t'day?"

"Thought you might like t' know that I found Matt Munsey," Gray said quietly.

"Yuh found 'im?" the sheriff repeated. "What's that s'pposed t' mean? Didn't he go t' California like he said he was goin'?"

"Like he said, hell!" Gray snapped. "Yuh mean like Doyle said! Matt didn't go anywheres. He's dead. I found his body wedged into his wife's coffin."

The sheriff's eyes bulged. The man sitting on the desk sprang to his feet.

"Yuh mean Matt was murdered?" he demanded incredulously.

Gray nodded. "His head was stove in."

"Give us th' rest o' th' story, partner," the man commanded. "Matt Munsey was a friend o' mine an' by Boy, I'll..."

"Shut up, Pete," the sheriff interrupted. "Let's hear this feller out. Go 'head, Mister."

"Wa-al," Gray began, addressing himself to the sheriff. "You know I was suspicious 'bout th' hull thing soon's I heard about it. You couldn't see anything wrong b'cause yuh had th' bill o' sale on file here an' you were satisfied that th' mark on it was Matt's. Wa-al, soon's you tol' me that Doyle brought it in by 'imself 'stead o' bringin' Matt along with 'im, I knew f'r shore there was somethin' wrong."

"By God," the man named Pete muttered.

"I got even more suspicious o' things," Gray continued, "when I overheard somethin' said to Doyle when he was playin' poker th' other night. He didn't have 'ny cash. He was playin' with gold nuggets an' some feller named Tom who was playin' with 'im made some r'mark about th' gold bein' fresh dug up an' pointed out that there was a speck o' dirt still clingin' to one o' th' nuggets."

THE MAN who had been squatting against the far wall straightened up and strode forward.

"That's right, stranger," he said quickly. "I was sittin' in on that game an' I r'member hearin' Tom Ferris say just that. What's more, I even r'member seein' you standin' there, too, lookin' on."

"Thanks," Gray said. He turned again to the sheriff. "How I managed t' get into th' house ain't 'specially important right now. Th' point is, I got in, knocked Doyle cold an' searched th' place. I stumbled on somethin' right off. In th' cellar, b'hind a lot of barrels an' things, I found a tiny door. Matt musta hit a gold vein, nuthin' much, y'understand. Anyway, Doyle found out about it an' th' way I figger it, when he found Matt unwillin' t' make any kind uv a deal, he just up an' busted Matt over th' head an' that was that."

"Why, th' murderin' dog!" Pete gritted through his teeth.

"Y'know," Gray went on, "that Doyle was a pretty smart feller. What's more, he nearly got away with th' killin', too. He stuffed Matt's body into Jennie's coffin figgerin' that nob'dy would ever have reason t' open it an' look inside uv it. But I had to. I'd looked all over without findin' 'ny trace o' Matt, an' that was just about th' on'y place left."

Pete hitched up his gunbelt. "I'll be seein' you fellers," he said and started toward the door.

Gray turned. "If yuh're goin' after Harry Doyle," he said over his shoulder, "yuh're wastin' your time. He's dead."

Pete halted in his tracks. He turned slowly and retraced his steps. "Yuh shore?"

Gray nodded. "Yep. Th' sheriff'll have t' ride out there soon enough an' you c'n go along with 'im an' see f'r y'self," he replied. "Y'know, a funny thing happened out there. F'r some reason I ain't been able t' figger out yet, Doyle strung rope around th' place. Anyway, I got diggin' around an' kinda f'rgot about him. He busted outta th' place an' tried t' make a run f'r it. In th' darkness he mighta got away with it."

"What pr'vented it?" the sheriff asked. "Them Colts o' your'n?"

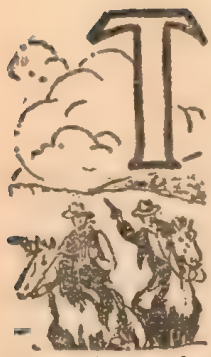
Ahab Gray shook his head. "Nope," he answered. "Doggoned if Doyle didn't trip over that rope o' his an' bust his neck!"

★

Special Feature

LET'S STEAL A COW!

by Lee Thomas



THE YEARLING Hereford steer was fat and sleek; he was grazing in the moonlight when the pickup truck pulled in close and stopped. The steer was used to seeing trucks so he did not move. A rifle cracked. The steer's knees buckled and he hit the ground dead. Three men ran out of the truck and tossed the carcass into the box, covering it with a tarp. Then the wheels of the truck spun gravel, and soon it was out of sight on the mountain road.

And the rancher had lost another steer.

So works the modern rustler. Before morning, the steer's carcass was in a walk-in box in a butcher shop in an oil-boom town. The hide was destroyed in an acid bath, and the rancher was out looking for a stray he would never find.

The modern rustler seldom, if ever, rides a horse. He rides a pickup truck or a big truck capable of transporting many stolen cattle. He usually works in the dark—and he works with speed and despatch. Sometimes he works alone and sometimes he is part of a rustling ring that reaches oftimes high into political circles. For beef is now worth money and a truckload of stolen steers is sometimes worth as much as five thousand dollars.

The old days when a rustler stole a beef via a fast horse and a long loop and a running-iron are almost a thing of the past; nowadays the routine is mechanized and systematized to what is almost perfection. The swiftness of the nefarious operation is possible because of the truck and super highways. Within a few hours, stolen beef can be across a state line, in a cooler, or either sold as steaks. So the cattle detective has to work speedily or he might not apprehend the rustlers.

And much cattle stealing is still going on in the West. As long as cattle are easy to get, and as long as the price per pound stays high, the rustler will take the risk of operating.

The rustler does not dangle at the end of the rope now if apprehended. He draws a penitentiary sentence. Many oldtimers wish that pioneer justice was still in order—a rope thrown over a tree, the noose around a rustler's neck, and a horse being whipped out from under him, leaving the man dancing on

thin air. But cattle-thievery—large-scale and small-scale—still continues.

One Colorado rancher came home to find the head of one of his finest steers lying in his driveway, the thieves were so bold. He never did find the beef that matched the head. In another instance —this one occurring in Wyoming—the thieves were tracked down in a very modern manner. A woman had seen a car enter a pasture and she had noticed stickers on the windshield and rear window. A car bearing such stickers was found miles away days later by an inquisitive sheriff. The driver broke down under questioning, and his winter lodging was assured in the local calaboose. In addition to sitting that particular winter out in a cell, he also had two more winters to hibernate—all because a rancher's wife had kept her eyes open, and because she viewed trucks with suspicion.

Brand-changing still goes on, but not in such strength as during the days of open range. But brand inspectors are hard to fool. When one brand is superimposed over another, the fact can be verified by skinning the animal and scraping the inside of the hide, for the old brand will then be visible—it has been on the animal a longer time and therefore has scar tissue.

Many years ago, cattlemen had to organize to stop rustling, and therefore the cattle protective associations were formed. To be competent today at his trade, an inspector has to be a trained detective. His job entails patient questioning and much riding, both in a jeep or on horseback. Such an incident occurred a few years ago in Colorado.

Some hides were found in an isolated country. The brands had been cut out, the hides stripped to escape identification. One rancher had reported having some choice Hereford steers stolen. The detective found the hides because of the circling of buzzards, and with the hides were the hoofs and part of the legs. By hard work and deduction, he matched these parts with beeves in a butcher's cooler, and this held up in court. And another rustler became a guest of the state in the penitentiary.

DESPITE the laws passed by State legislatures, cattle stealing still continued in full force until about 1941, when the McCarran Act was passed in Congress, making it a federal offense to transport cattle or livestock—stolen, livestock, that is—across state lines. This brought in the FBI. It also made things difficult for ranches that extended from one state into another. Technically, each cow that went across the mythical line, although owned by the same owner, was due for federal inspection.

Montana early went at the business of eradicating the cow-thief. Early in its history the Treasure State started to register cow-brands. Because of open range and no fences, steers sometimes wandered for miles and miles—especially in the winter, when driven south by the blizzards. In the early days there was no baby beef. Steers were trailed-out or shipped out when three or four years old. And a steer or cow can wander a long distance inside of three years. A very, very long distance.

Such an incident occurred to a rancher on the Milk River of northern Montana. From his section on the Milk to Miles City down on the Yellowstone river is about two hundred miles, yet one time one of his wandering four-year-old steers was shipped by a rancher out of Miles.

The rancher ran so many head he had not missed the steer on roundup. Then how did he find out that the steer had been shipped out of Miles City? Years before, stockmen had agreed to ship any three or four-year-old stuff that was on their range and did not belong to them, regardless of the brand. This, of course, held good only for steers—for what good is an

old steer? The man who shipped the steer was in turn paid for it at market. He then sent a list of the stray brands he had shipped to the stockman's association at the state capitol in Helena. The association then published this list, sending it to local newspapers.

So the Milk river cowman discovered, to his surprise, that one of his steers had wandered at least two hundred miles. He then had only to write the association, prove his claim to the steer's brand, and collect the price the steer had pulled net at market—for the Miles City cowman had deposited this sum with the association.

This of course was not rustling; this was merely helping out a neighbor stockman whom, in this instance, the Miles City cowman did not even know.

The stockmen in Texas work the deal a little differently. They have brand inspectors located at the big markets to inspect all cattle who come out of the Southwest. These inspectors, trained to their jobs, then pick out brands that show irregularities, and such cases are inspected and probed. One year almost three million cattle were shipped to these centers and inspectors found about 1,100 brands that did not conform. Arrests were made and out of twenty nine, twelve men were sent to the penitentiary.

Prior to the McCarran Act's passage, trucks took many head of stolen cattle out of the west for eastern markets, the trucks moving night and day. But with the FBI in the saddle, this form of rustling has in the last few years taken a serious drop. Federal pens do not look inviting, even from the outside.

Much of the stolen beef therefore goes into local private coolers and to unscrupulous butchers, despite the fact that each piece of meat sold over the counter should bear the U. S. stamp.

Therefore the younger stuff—the calves and yearlings—are the most apt to be stolen. They are lighter and therefore easier to handle. Ranches in many cases are still huge, covering hundreds of acres, and each acre cannot, of course, be patrolled. Some beeves are stolen by local ranchers—yea, even neighbors—who do not want to butcher their own steers, but want to save them for market. Such was the case recently in Montana. Stock detectives traced the butchering of a few head of fine registered Herefords to a neighboring rancher.

"Just didn't crave to eat my own meat," he said in his defense, for the evidence was too strong against him.

Now he is eating the state's free meat in Deer Lodge pen.

Some of these rustlers pose as deer hunters. They meekly ask permission to hunt on a rancher's land and they bow their red caps in submission. Once on the range and out of sight a steer might *accidentally* get shot and fall into their truck or pickup. And ranches have rear gates in their fences—gates miles from the ranch-house. This has also occurred to the sheep-raisers. It isn't hard to shoot a young lamb or ewe, slit its throat and let it bleed, and then boost it into a truck to be covered with a tarp. In some cases the rustlers have even stolen chickens; so cow-thievery, in this case, had hit a new low.

Many Western states years ago passed laws prohibiting the carrying on horseback, or in a vehicle, what is termed a "running iron." A running-iron is a straight branding iron that usually has a ring on one end. This can be heated quickly and can be used to change brands. The law long ago emphasized that only "stamp brands" could be toted. A stamp brand is a legitimate brand that can stamp out only one brand—for instance, a Lazy A or some other brand. Woe to the man caught toting a running-iron on the range today!

But despite all the laws and pre-

cautions, cattle-stealing is still a big operation today. Big Cities are close to the range and the automobile, beside changing the pattern of life for law-abiding people, has definitely made rustling much easier. Headlights in the night, the crack of a rifle, the heaving of a carcass into a truck bed, and then the headlights storming down the road . . . and another beef has been rustled.

Sometimes the man who buys the beefsteaks—Mr. John Q. Citizen—has been rather lenient to the cow-thief, too. A rustler is arrested after much work by the stockgrowers' detectives. He is bound over for trial. John, being a citizen, gets on the jury. He hears the evidence pro and con, and he does some thinking on his own hook; many times his thoughts run in this manner:

"They claim this innocent looking fellow has stolen some cattle. He is a poor man and I am poor, too. He stole from a cowman and all cowmen are rich. (This philosophy is prevalent because beefsteaks are so high at the butcher-shop.) He has a wife and children he has to support, just as I have to support my woman and kids. He stole from the rich and he is poor."

Therefore in many cases the cow-thief gets acquitted, is saved by a hung jury, or, if convicted, gets a light sentence. John goes home to his wife and kids thinking he has done his duty. The cowmen sit in the back rows and groan.

Such an incident has happened in many a court-room. A few years ago, after some cow-thiefs had been arrested, word got around that, under the statutes, they could draw sentences up to seventy years in prison.

This made one oldtimer angry. He had seen a few rustlers dancing on the end of a rope, and he maintained such primitive justice was in order in this case. He fumed and stormed. "Just *seventy* years! Hell, they're gittin' off easy—they oughta git *life*!"

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MALE STRIKEBREAKER

●

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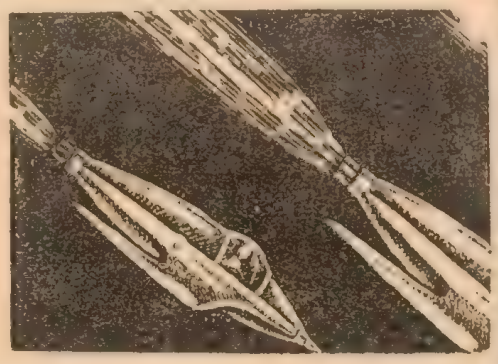

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Juan Murphy had never had a chance, and now that he was out of prison and back in Canyon City, no one wanted to give him a break. No one except Marshal Borgan . . .

It was said that Juan Murphy had pulled off many raids.

GUNSMOKE REDEMPTION

by WILLIAM F. SCHWARTZ

MARSHAL AARON BORGAN, Canyon City's only paid lawman, leaned back in his creaking swivel chair and eyed the self-appointed delegation of citizens who stood before his spur-marked desk. There were three of them, he saw; short, pot-bellied Silk Watson, who controlled the town's politics; Ed Anderson, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, a squat, broad-shouldered rancher in dusty range clothes; and tall, dignified, gray-haired Hugh Lambert, president of the Canyon City First National Bank.

"I'm sorry," Borgan said, quietly. There was apology in his words, but not in his tone. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but it can't be done."

"Can't be done!" Silk Watson echoed. His voice was a breathless wheeze with a snarl of disbelief behind it. "What d'yuh mean—it can't be done? Juan Murphy's an outlaw, I tell yuh. Yuh gotta order him outta town!"

Borgan shook his head. "I can't. Murphy's wanted nowhere as far as I can discover; I just can't order him out of town for no reason at all."

"But he's a jailbird!" Silk insisted. "That gives yuh the right to—"

"That gives me no right at all!" Borgan cut in, his voice brittle. "Sure! Juan Murphy's served time in jail, but that was years ago. He served his sentence. He has every right to come back here to live; don't forget, he was born in Canyon City."

"And he was sent to jail from Canyon City. Don't forget that, neither!" Silk reminded. Then he looked to Anderson for help. "And fer cattle-rustlin', too."

"That's right!" Anderson agreed with a high-pitched nasal twang. "That's right—fer cattle-rustlin'. Don't forget, Marshal, that we don't cotton to cattle-rustlers around these parts. Murphy was lucky to escape last time without being hanged; and we heard a lot about him since."

"What, for instance?"

"You heard, as well as us, Marshal," Anderson said, "that Juan Murphy's supposed to be a member of the Dalford gang. And you know who they are— a bunch of cattle-stealin', bank-robbin bandits. Everybody says Murphy rode with that gang for years."

Borgan shook his head again. "It's never been proved that Juan Murphy rode with the Dalford mob. All you're goin' on, Anderson, is rumors."

"But there's somethin' fishy about Murphy." That was Silk Watson jibing in again. "Somethin' rotten and fishy. He left Canyon City ten years ago to serve a sentence for cattle-rustlin'. Then, he was nuthin' but a penniless orphan. We all know his sentence was five years; he served his sentence and we didn't see him no more. We thought we was rid of him. Now, he turns up in fancy clothes with plenty of money in his pockets. Where did he get all this money, Marshal, if he didn't get it from ridin' with some outlaw mob?"

"Murphy says he got the money from investments and gamblin'—mostly from gamblin'," Borgan informed them. "And there ain't no law—yet—in this Territory against gamblin'."

"INVESTMENTS!" That was Hugh Lambert, the bank president, who finally spoke. "I'd like to know what sort of investments they were. Marshal, surely you can understand my position in this. The Dalford gang is composed of notorious bank robbers, I can't afford to have a man like Juan Murphy loose in this community. He's a menace to my bank. He's been in my bank several times since he's been here, getting large bills changed into smaller denominations. But, if we can go by his reputation he was probably—well—to resort to the vernacular, 'casing' my bank for a future hold-up. He rented a room at the Cowman's Rest Hotel; and you know as well as I that the Cowman's Rest is just across Main Street from the First National Bank. I often see him sitting at the window of the barroom of the Cowman's Rest; he keeps his eyes glued to my bank. He knows when the bank opens and he knows when it closes. He's probably figuring the best time of the day to stage a hold-up."

"But," Borgan insisted, "he's relayed no information to anybody—not since he's been here, at least. He hasn't left town once since he got here about two weeks ago; and he hasn't sent any telegrams, either; I got Clooney, down at the telegraph office, posted to give me the word any time Murphy tries to send a telegram. And that isn't all: every piece of mail that leaves Canyon City got to go through Nick Howard's combination grocery store and post office. I got Nick on the watch, too. Only this mornin', Nick told me that Murphy hasn't sent out a letter since he got here."

"But that's neither here nor there!" Silk Watson cut in. "The law-abidin' citizens of Canyon City have decided that the community would be a better place to live in if Juan Murphy's miles and miles away from here. Murphy's gotta go; that's all there is to it—Murphy's gotta go! And it's your duty, Marshal, to tell him to get out."

BORGAN MADE no comment for a moment. He shoved his sweat-stained Stetson back from his forehead and showed thinning grey hair. His wrinkled, weather-beaten face was calm, but a hint of fire started to show in his washed-out gray-blue eyes, which were the color of faded denim. "I hate for you gentlemen," he began in a strained voice, "to come here and tell me what my duty is. I've been marshal here nigh on to twenty years.

"I hope it don't sound like braggin' when I say this, but Canyon City was a pretty rugged frontier town when I was hired. It wasn't safe to walk down Main Street—especially on Saturday nights—unless you were wearin' a firearm of some sort. And there were a lot of unsolved murders, too. But things are changed more than a mite, now, gentlemen. There hasn't been a shootin' in Canyon City for a good many years. And to add to my arguement, gentlemen, there ain't one of you packin' a gun right now; no doubt, you don't think it's necessary. That shows I was successful, partly at least, in riddin' this town of crime and lawlessness. I guess it ain't necessary for you gentlemen to inform me what my duty is."

"But Juan Murphy's packin' a gun!" Watson broke in. "A big, pearl-handled .45 that musta cost a young fortune. He's carryin' a gun."

"But there ain't no law, in this community," Borgan reminded, "against anybody wearin' a gun. If he wants to, that's his business; I can't interfere with that, not accordin' to law."

"There should be a law," Ed Anderson insisted. "There should be a law against convicted rustlers carryin' guns, even though they say they make their livin' now by gamblin'. I'm here to represent the cattle interests, Marshal; there ain't no need for me to elaborate on that. We don't like Juan Murphy's presence here in town; and we're liable to do somethin' about it, Marshal, if you don't."

Inside, Borgan felt anger fester; he fought to control it. "I wouldn't advise that, Anderson," he said, quietly. "I won't stand for no trouble. You know that."

"And I don't want no trouble, either," Anderson added. "But I can't guarantee what might happen if Juan Murphy stays here much longer. The ranchers are startin' to get riled up. They're liable to act, with or without your blessin'. Juan Murphy might get rode outta town on a rail— if he's lucky, that is. On the other hand, the cattlemen might remember he's a rustler and decide to use a rope instead of a rail. A rope's the only real way to put a stop to a rustler."

Borgan stood up. He was a tall, lean man over six feet tall, even though his shoulders were slightly bent and his long legs were slightly bowed from many hours spent in a saddle.

"You make it hard for me gentlemen." His protest—and his voice—sounded mild enough, even though he was starting to seethe inwardly. "You make it hard for me all around. I already had a talk or two with Murphy. I know how he feels; he knows he's not wanted around here; but he won't leave—not unless he's forced. And I have no right to force him. This is his home town; like I said, he was born right here in Canyon City. I remember him when I came here. He was already half an orphan then. His father was killed in a drunken brawl on Main Street before I was hired here. I never knew him, but I understand he was Irish.

"Juan's mother was Mexican. I remember her as a half-starved woman who lived in a shanty on the outskirts of town. The place was a mess, but it was clean inside. She tried to make a livin' for Juan and herself by washin' and ironin' and sewin'. She didn't make much of a livin' because the women around these parts, back then, did their own housework and such. I know there was times when her and Juan didn't have enough to eat.

"THE BOY was always in trouble. I remember once when I was sent out to arrest Juan because he swiped a chicken from Cal Grogan's hen house. When I got to Juan's mother's place, the chicken was still alive, because Juan's mother was too honest to kill and eat a stolen chicken, even though I know damn well she was hungry. Juan cried and pleaded with me to let him keep the chicken. It was near Christmas-time and he said he didn't taste chicken on Christmas since his father died.

"Juan was only a shaver when his mother passed away. I kin remember him, half-clothed and half-starved, wanderin' around the streets, tryin' to beg, borrow and—I'm sorry it was that way—stealin' for a livin'. He tried to be honest. He shined boots; he washed dishes at the *Elite Cafe;* he begged money from drunken cowpokes on Saturaday nights."

"And he wasn't above rollin' drunken cowpokes on Saturday night, either." That was Silk Watson who interrupted once more. "I remember how he was caught red-handed with a ten dollar bill that he swiped outta the pocket of a drunken cowpoke he found stupified from the red eye in the alley behind the *Good Chance Saloon.* He was always a trouble-maker. I remember—"

"Let me finish, Silk, please!" Borgan cut in. "I know all that; I remember it well. After all, I had more dealings with Juan Murphy than you did. After all, I was the one who took him off to prison that time after he killed a stray yearlin' out on the Three Forks River."

"And I remember, too." Ed Anderson cut in. "That yearlin' was a stray, but it was X Bar X property; Juan Murphy cut it up into steaks."

"Because he was hungry," Borgan added. "Juan was only sixteen at the time."

"But old enough to know better!" Watson snapped. . .

"He was," Borgan admitted. "Juan damn near got a rope that time, too. I remember that a half dozen X Bar X men had him tied up under a tree, with a rope around his neck. I was lucky to get there in time." . .

"Too bad you did!" Silk Watson said heatedly.

Borgan sighed. "I was the Law here then, and I'm the Law here now. And I'll be the Law until I retire or until I'm replaced by somebody less, acordin' to due process of the Law. But let me finish.

"It was me that insisted on a trial for Juan Murphy," Borgan went on. "It was me that took him off to prison; I remember how he cried when they put him in a cell and locked the doors.

"ALL THE way back from the prison, after I left Juan there, I kept thinkin' of how hard it was goin' to be on a kid of sixteen bein' locked up for five long years in prison especially a kid like Juan who was used to bein' as free as—well—as free as a bird, livin' out in the open most of the time, sleepin' out at nights on the prairie when the weather was fit for it.

"That made me think, gentlemen. That made me think that maybe we should have given him a better chance in life. After all, he was partly our responsibility; he was born here. Maybe we should have taken better care of him while he was young. Maybe we should have seen he had better food, better clothes, better—"

"Oh, skip that, Marshal!" Watson cut in again. "That ain't the issue that's at stake now. Juan Murphy's got plenty of money now; and maybe only him and the Dalford gang knows where he got it."

Borgan sighed, shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it's no use. I was just tryin' to say we all remember Juan when he was an irresponsible kid—a kid that was gettin' under our feet and into our hair all the time. I wanted to

say he's changed now. He's paid for his crime; and he did it on his own hook, without any help from any of us. But you gentlemen remember him when he was a—"

"A troublemaker!" Anderson finished the sentence. "Listen, Marshal, we know, for certain, that he killed one stray calf and ate part of it. And there could have been other strays he killed and ate, too, without nobody else findin' out about it. Sure, he was only a kid at the time. Sixteen, you say; well, I was workin' on my Dad's ranch —and workin' damn hard, too—when I was a lot less than sixteen. Sure, he might have been hungry. But why raise cattle—and what profit would there be in it, if every hungry kid killed a yearlin' or two every time he felt like it? You got a poor argument, Marshal?"

"And that's not all!" This was from Lambert. "It's not only Juan Murphy's past we're concerned with here, Marshal; there's also his potential to consider. He's rumored to be a bank robber. Suppose he is? He's a menace to my bank, my means of livlihood, my—"

"All right! All right!" Borgan threw up his hands. "I'll talk to Murphy again; I'll try to convince him to leave Canyon City. I'm sorry to say so, gentlemen, but I guess I'm licked. I reckon," he added with a wry smile, "that it's the will of the people." Slowly, he rose to his full height; then he started for the door with a long, crane-like stride. "I'll talk to Juan now," he told them. "But—" he added, over his shoulder, as he left the room, "but it's still up to him. If he goes peacefully, well and good; but I won't force him."

MARSHAL AARON BORGAN found Juan Murphy sitting at a table in the barroom of the Cowmen's Rest Hotel. Juan, a well-groomed figure in a black suit and white shirt with a black string tie, was playing solitaire and had a bottle of whiskey and a glass at his elbow.

"Care for a drink, Marshal?" Juan offered when Borgan approached the table.

Borgan shook his head. "No, thanks." He reached for one of the wooden chairs around the table and sat astraddle with his long arms folded across the chair's back. "This is business, Juan; not social."

Juan showed even white teeth in a noncommittal smile. His eyes, starkly blue, in an' almost handsome swarthy face, seemed faintly amused. "I guess I know what kind of business, Marshal."

"I reckon yuh do."

"Why won't they let me alone, Marshal?" Juan asked. "I've harmed nobody since I'm here; I've tried to live up to the Law. Why don't they just let me alone?"

"It goes a long way back, Juan."

Juan frowned. "That's right, Marshal; a long way back. I killed a stray because I was hungry, and they can't forget it."

"That's right."

"But I'd pay for that stray, Marshal. I'd pay twice its present market value, but I guess that wouldn't satisfy them, either."

"I reckon not."

"Then what would you suggest I do, Marshal?"

"Leave town."

Juan Murphy smiled, but there was no mirth in it; his blue eyes were grim. "I don't intend to do that, Marshal. Not yet, anyway." Then he asked, "Just what charges are there against me, Marshal? How could you run me out of town?"

"I'm not runnin' you out," Borgan told him; "I ain't got no right. But maybe it would be for the best."

"But why, Marshal?"

Borgan sighed. "I won't lie to you, Juan, but it looks like you're hated here. I just had a delegation of citizens in my office. They insist I run yuh

out of town. I told them I'd talk to yuh, but the decision's up to you."

"Thanks, Marshal, but I'm staying. I know it puts you in a spot, and I owe you a lot. You saved my life the time those cowpokes were all set on hanging me. And I still remember the time I stole that chicken. I remember how you took that chicken away from me and took it back to the owner. But, I remember too, how you showed up with another chicken an hour later—so my mother and I could have a chicken dinner at Christmas. I'll never forget that, Marshal, as long as I live."

Borgan made no comment. Some men might, he thought to himself, ask Juan Murphy to leave town as a favor to them if they were in his present predicament. But as marshal of Canyon City he was never in the habit of asking favors; it went against his grain.

Finally, Borgan said, "It's up to you, Juan. But, I warn you, there might be trouble."

JUAN SMILED again. "Trouble, Marshal? I'm used to trouble. Trouble's been riding on my shoulder ever since I was a kid. And I'm not helpless now, the way I used to be. I'm wearing a gun, Marshal; and let me assure you, I know how to use it."

"But I want no gunplay here," Borgan told him.

"And I won't *start* any trouble," Juan hastened to assure him. "I'll keep my sixgun in leather as long as nobody pushes me."

Borgan sighed again. "But that might happen—just that; somebody might push you."

"And whose side will you be on then, Marshal? Theirs or mine?"

Borgan shrugged his shoulders. "I'll wait. I'll see. Then I'll decide." Then he added, "I'll see who starts it—first; before I take any action."

"Thanks, Marshal; I know you'll be fair. I didn't come here to start trouble. But, if it comes for me, I'll be ready for it. I've been out of prison for five years now; there'll never be cause again to send me back.

"You know, Marshal," Juan went on. "A lot's happened to me since I got out of jail. I didn't waste my time. In prison, I had time to think it over. I learned a lot—when I was in prison and since. Funny thing, Marshal, I hardly knew how to read or write when I was

[Turn Page]

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sent to the pen. But, lucky for me, I met a man inside who taught me a lot.

"He was a former school teacher who was serving time for stealing some school board funds. He pitied me, I guess, but he acted like a private tutor to me whenever he had the time. He had a family back East who sent him books and paper and pencil and pen and ink. He taught me a lot. How to read, how to write, how to talk and act properly in company. Once, Marshal, I used to eat with my fingers; but, now, I'll wager, I can use a knife and fork as well as any high-toned citizen in Canyon City.

"I have money, Marshal, more than I ever dreamed I'd have. How I got it is my business. But a lot of it, I'll tell you, I won at cards. I came back to Canyon City for a couple of reasons, and not all good reasons, I guess. One reason was to show the people here that the half-starved urchin whom they kicked around grew up to be as rich and cultured as any of them. They used to spit at me; now I can spit at them, a good deal of them. Of course, the word 'spit' I use in a figurative sense."

Juan smiled faintly. Then went on: "No, Marshal, I'm not leaving Canyon City; not yet. And you needn't worry about protecting me." He patted the ornate pearl-handled .45 he wore at his right hip. "I have my own protection—right here."

Borgan eyed the sixshooter, bleakly. "Yeah," he began, "that gun. Your gun, Juan, was under discussion at our little confab, too. They was wonderin' why you're wearin' it. You see, nobody but me wears a gun around Canyon City any more; not for the past few years. And with me, the gun's as much as a badge of my office as the star on my vest. They can't figure out why

[Turn to Page 84]

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you're packin' a gun when nobody else does but me."

JUAN SMILED again. "For my protection, I said, Marshal. I have ears, too; I've been hearing some rumors. I understand that some cattlemen have been saying they should have hanged me years ago. That's one reason I've been wearing this forty-five; I'm not hankering to have some hemp around my throat. I intend to wear this gun as long as I'm in town, Marshal."

Borgan sighed again; then stood up. "So you're stayin' then? Your mind's made up?"

Juan nodded. "It is, Marshal; it is made up."

"One other thing," Borgan added, "people been sayin' you're part of the Dalford gang. Ed Anderson, the president of the First National Bank across the street, says that's why you're here. He says you're a look-out for the gang, and that's why you rented a room here at the Cowmen's Rest where you can watch the bank. That's why, he says, you spend hours lookin' across the street, watchin' the bank. You been watchin' the bank, Juan? I warn yuh, I want a straight answer."

Juan Murphy hesitated a moment before he replied. His brow was wrinkled in thought, Borgan saw; and, for a moment or two, his blue eyes seemed evasive. Finally, he nodded. "I won't lie to you, Marshal; I *have* been watching the bank. Why not? It's a busy place. I see familiar people coming and going from it. People I've known only a short while. Besides, how can I avoid looking at the bank when I'm at this window? But—" he laughed; and, parently, had appeased them—for the time being. But Borgan wondered what course he would take if nothing new developed. He could hardly chase Juan Borgan noted, the laugh was toneless and entirely without mirth. "But, I assure you, I'm not planning to rob the

[Turn to Page 86]

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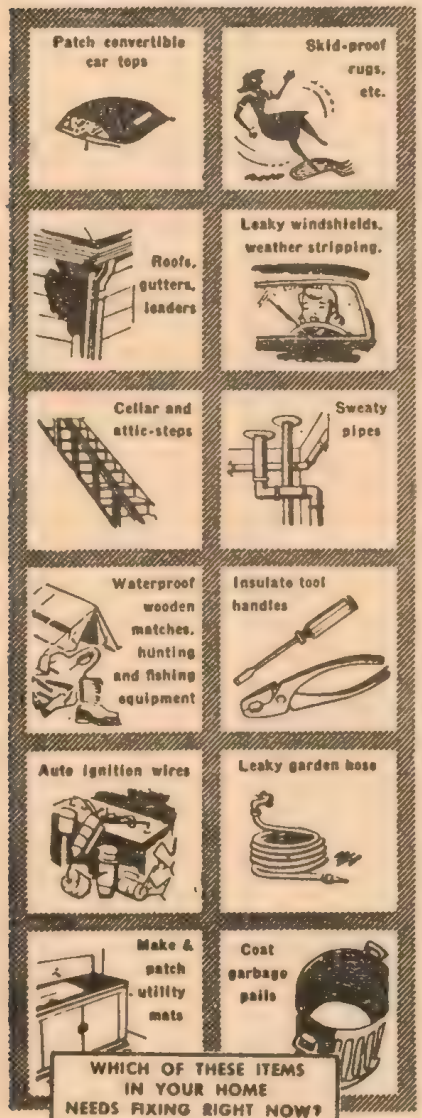

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bank; and I'm not a member of the Dalford gang!"

Borgan thought it over a moment; then he, too, nodded. "Okay, Juan, I'll take your word on it." Then he waved goodbye and stalked away from the table. But, inside, he was wondering whether or not he could trust Juan Murphy.

Hugh Lambert, it seemed, had cause to worry about Juan's actions in keeping an apparent watch on the First National; and Borgan remembered that he, himself, had heard rumors that Murphy had been seen in towns where the Dalford gang had robbed banks. There was more to this than he could figure at the moment, Borgan told himself. Maybe he better keep his eyes—and brain—open where Juan Murphy was concerned. As he walked from the barroom into sunlit Main Street, Marshal Aaron Borgan had a premonition of impending trouble that would involve Murphy; and the citizens' committee.

But, at the moment, Borgan reminded himself, he could do nothing but wait for developments. Almost mechanically, he fingered the heavy walnut-handled .45 he wore on his right thigh. That sixshooter, he was aware, was the only protection that town really had against the Dalford gang if they rode into Canyon City to rob the First National; the only protection against Murphy, too, if it turned out he was a member of the gang.

A FEW HOURS later, Marshal Aaron Borgan was sweeping out his office. He had stalled off the citizens' committee's demand for the expulsion of Juan Murphy from Canyon City by asking for more time. "I'll keep an eye on Juan for a day or two," he had promised Silk Watson and the others. "If he acts suspicious, I'll give him his walkin' papers." That, apparently, had appeased them—for the time being. But Borgan wondered what course he would take if nothing new

[Turn to Page 88]

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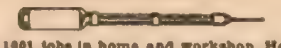

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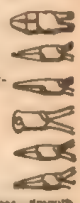

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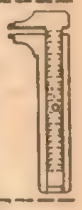

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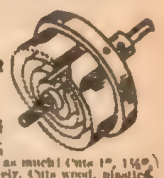

Fits any electric drill, drill press, lathe, motor. Automatic slug ejector pops out slug immediately. This saw works 3 times as fast as other hole saws that will do twice as much! Cuts 1", 1⅛", 2" and 2½" holes cleanly, accurately. Cuts wood, plastics, metals, formica, wall board, etc. Has extra grooves in tool head to accommodate 1⅛", 1⅝" and 2½" blades. Consists of sturdy alloy tool head, 4 finest quality, shatter-proof blades, automatic slug ejector and ¼" drill bit.

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developed. He could hardly chase Juan out of town for merely watching the business at the First National.

Borgan was so busy with his sweeping that he failed to notice the two men who rode down Main Street past his office; and he had no way of knowing that two others rode into Canyon City from the opposite direction. If he had seen them, he would have acted instantly—because all four men wore long white linen dusters, the garb of the Dalford gang.

But the word reached him quickly enough. Ten-year-old Christy Dwyer came running, breathlessly, into the Marshal's office. Christy was office boy at the First National.

"Mister Lambert sent me!" Christy explained. "There's some strange men down by the bank. It looks like they're goin' to rob the bank. Mister Lambert says for you to come down—right away."

"Thanks, Christy," Borgan said.

Borgan had a clear view of the First National Bank as he hurried down Main Street. Even now, he saw, the robbery had started. Two men in dusters, with gunnysacks in their hands, were dashing across the street into the bank. Two other men, both dressed the same way, loitered at a hitching rack near the Cowmen's Rest Hotel.

Maybe this was suicide, Borgan told himself, pitting his one gun against four bandits; but there was no time to consider that. He was a paid lawman, and his duty lay clear before him. He

[Turn to Page 90]

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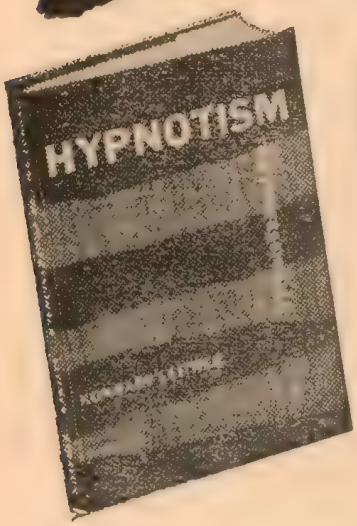

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ducked into a side street, ran down a back alley; he had his .45 in his hand now.

Borgan came out on Main Street again about twenty yards from the First National. He wasted no time; he sent a slug whistling at the two men at the hitching rack the moment he emerged from the side street. He saw the hat of one of the men go sailing from his head. He fired again. This time, he missed completely, and ducked behind a convenient horse-trough for cover.

Then the bandits began to return his gunfire. One was down on his knee in the street, his gun spitting lead; the other lay sprawled in the dust of Main Street. At first, Borgan thought the latter had been hit. But he saw almost immediately that he was wrong; the second bandit was aiming his shots, carefully and deliberately, at the horse trough. Borgan felt some slivers of wood bite into his face as lead from the second outlaw thudded into the boards of the trough.

Borgan kept concealed behind the trough, pinned down by the gunfire of the outlaws. Main Street, he noted dully, was completely deserted now, except for the two bandits. The townspeople had fled out of sight at the first sound of guns.

So, Borgan told himself, he was left alone to face the bandits. There was nothing he could do now, he realized, but shoot it out with them. But it would be at least four guns against one. The outcome, for the moment, looked certain.

BORGAN POKED his arm and his .45 out from behind a corner of the horse trough for another shot at the bandits. He was determined to get at least one of them before they gunned him down. But, suddenly, a red hot iron seemed to burn his arm; just above the elbow. He realized immediately that he was hit; his right arm, too. He could

[Turn to Page 92]

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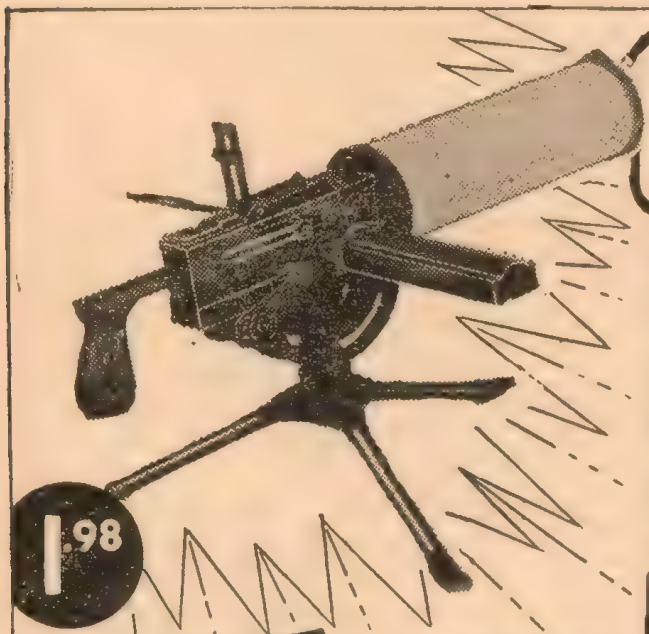

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shoot with his left hand, but not as well as with his right—and the .45 had dropped from his hand when he was wounded. To retrieve it, he would have to leave the shelter of the horse trough.

Borgan grabbed his bleeding arm and mouthed bitter blasphemy. The only course open to him, it seemed like, was to crawl away; down the alley; and hide.

But then, from out of the side street, came a man with a gun in his hand. Juan Murphy! Borgan breathed fresh curses; so Juan was a member of the outlaw gang after all. And he, himself, was trapped. Murphy was behind him, the other bandits in front; he was trapped!

Juan Murphy fired. Aaron Borgan saw the flame spit from his gun and waited, almost patiently, for the shock that would come when the slug from the .45 ripped into his body.

But the Marshal heard the buzz of the slug, like an angry bee, as it whizzed over his head. Juan had missed with his first shot, Borgan told himself. But there would be others; and Juan could hardly miss again at such a close range.

Murphy fired again. But this time Borgan realized, that Juan's gunfire was not directed at him. Juan was shooting at the bandits; and as Borgan watched, amazed, the bandit who had been on one knee, crumpled and rolled over in the street.

The bandit who had been sprawled on the street got to his feet, tried to run away. But another bullet from Juan's .45 sent him spinning; and he, too, collapsed into the dust of Main Street.

In a couple of seconds, Murphy was beside Aaron Borgan behind the horse trough.

"You're hit!" Juan said when he saw the Marshal's bleeding arm. "Sorry I didn't get here sooner, but I was down at the general store to buy some tobacco. Where's the rest of the gang?"

[Turn to Page 94]

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"There's two of them in the bank," Borgan told him.

"Good! They're sitting ducks."

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"That's Hank Dalford himself!" Juan breathed to Borgan; then he was on his feet, throwing lead across the street from his belching .45.

HANK DALFORD halted in midstride; he seemed to run into a

brick wall. Then, slowly, he slithered down into the dusty street. His gun and the gunnysack dropped from his lifeless fingers.

Then the last bandit emerged from the bank; but his hands were bare; he held them skyward in surrender.

"Let's get him before he changes his mind," Juan ordered Borgan; they started across the street.

Murphy was tying the only surviving bandit's hands behind his back with the bandit's own kerchief when people began to appear out of the buildings along Main Street. They were bug-eyed, Borgan saw, with excitement.

"I guess I can tell you now," Juan said to Borgan, "where I got some of my money. I'm a professional bandit hunter. Dalford and his gang had a price on their heads. I learned, through

[Turn to Page 96]

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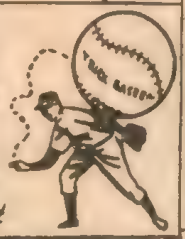

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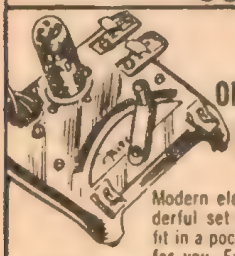

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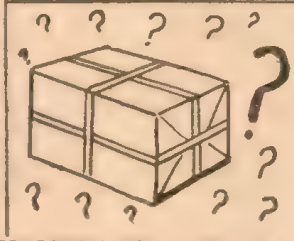

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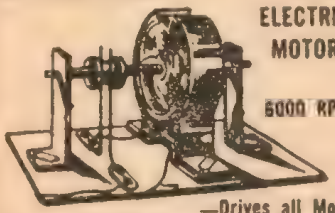

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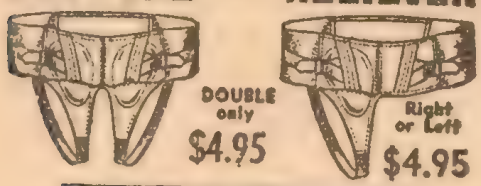

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the grapevine, that they intended to hold up the bank here. That's why I came here—to get them and get the reward; I've been after Dalford a long time."

"I guess," Borgan commented, "that's why we heard you were seen in a couple of towns where Dalford and his gang struck."

"That's right," Juan started to say more, but he couldn't; the crowd was clustered around them.

First to speak, as usual, was Silk Watson. "Marshal, I want to congrat-

[Turn to Page 98]

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

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(Signature of publisher)

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(My commission expires March 30, 1958.)

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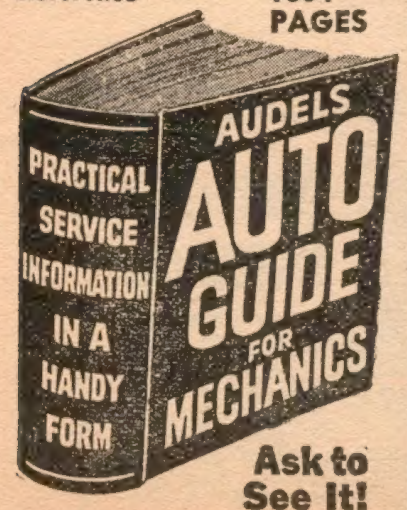

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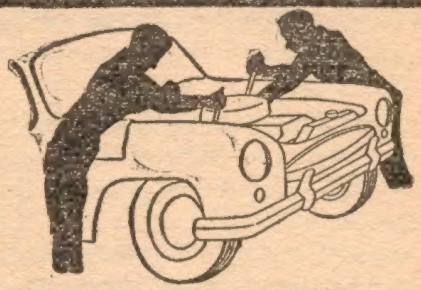

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ulate you," Silk began. "you sure got this gang; you sure—"

"Stow it!" Borgan cut in. "Did you see the gun battle, Silk?"

Watson cleared his throat before he spoke again. "Well, not exactly, Marshal, you see, I was—"

"Hidin' out somewheres," Borgan finished for him. "Well, you're all wrong, Silk; I had practically nuthin' to do with this. Juan did it all. He gunned down them three dead bandits while I was lyin' helpless and wounded over there behind that horse trough."

"But *I* saw it." That was from Ed Anderson, who was shoving his way through the crowd. "It looks like we had you wrong, Murphy. We figured that because you was watchin' the bank all the time from across the street at the Cowmen's Rest that you was a lookout for them."

"Not a lookout," Juan explained, "but I was looking for them. That's why I rented that room at the Cowman's Rest. I heard they were coming here. I waited to collect the reward for them."

By that time, Hugh Lambert was out of the bank and coming through the crowd. "They had me backed up against a wall in the bank," Lambert informed Juan, "but I could see out the window. I—I—" he hesitated. "I guess I owe you an apology, Juan. I was wrong about you. I guess we were all wrong. But—" Then he held out his hand. "Welcome to Canyon City, Juan. Let me congratulate you, you're an asset to the community."

There was more hand-shaking. Ed Anderson told Juan, "I guess the cattlemen will forget all about that stray now, Juan. You paid off the debt in lead."

Borgan said nothing; he started to herd the only live prisoner off to the lockup. But he was happy, too. It looked as if Juan Murphy, the prodigal son of Canyon City, would be able to stay at home now and walk the streets with his head held high. And Marshal Aaron Borgan was glad for that.

★

ANSWER

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